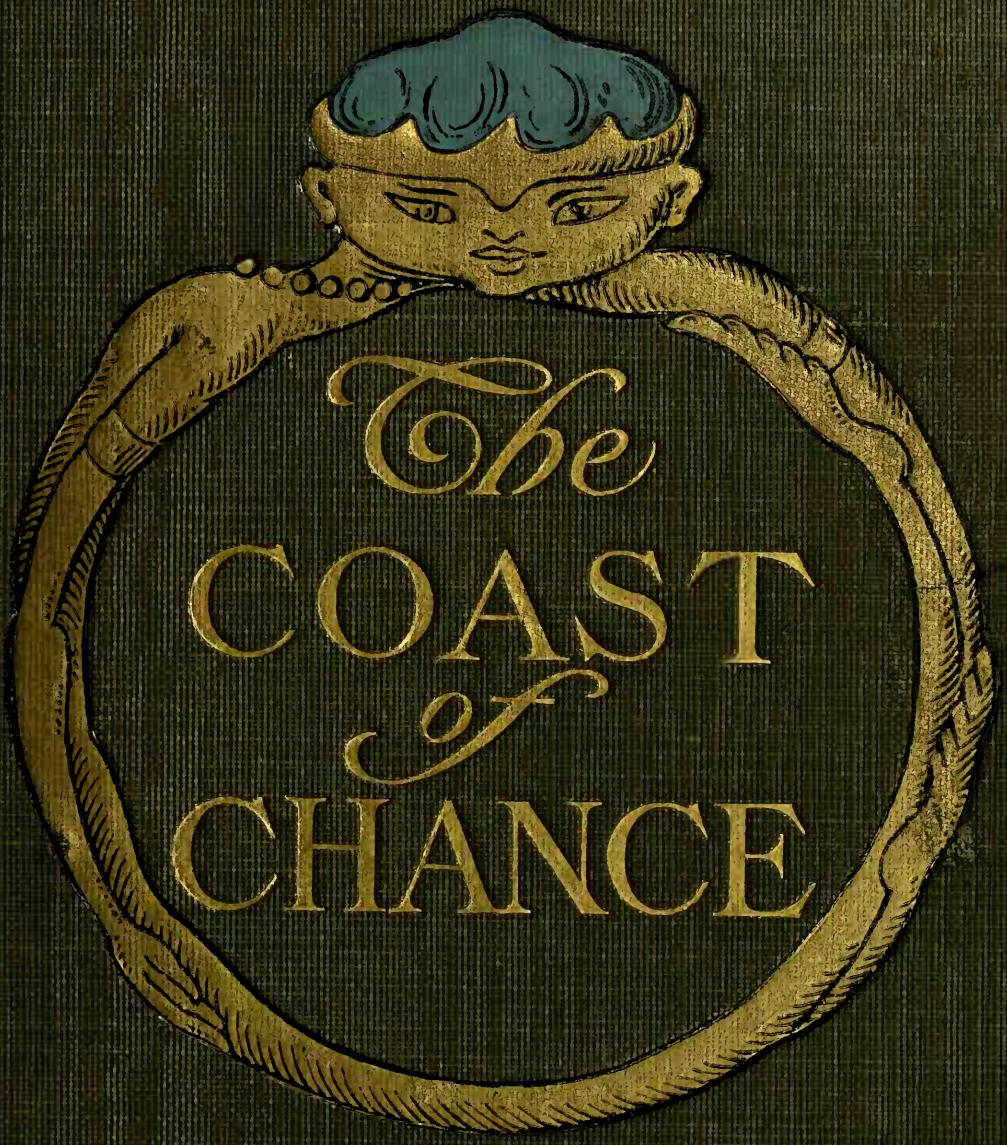

The Coast of Chance

ESTHER & LUCIA CHAMBERLAIN

Jno. B. Oram

THE COAST OF CHANCE

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CLARENCE F. UNDERWOOD

THE
COAST OF CHANCE

By

ESTHER AND LUCIA CHAMBERLAIN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

CLARENCE F. UNDERWOOD

INDIANAPOLIS
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
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THE COAST OF CHANCE

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I

THE VANISHING MYSTERY

FLORA Gilsey stood on the threshold of her dining-room. She had turned her back on it. She swayed forward. Her bare arms were lifted. Her hands lightly caught the molding on either side of the door. She was looking intently into the mirror at the other end of the hall. All the lights in the dining-room were lit, and she saw herself rather keenly set against their brilliance. The straight-held head, the lifted arms, the short, slender waist, the long, long sweep of her skirts made her seem taller than she actually was; and the strong, bright growth of her hair and the vivacity of her face made her seem more deeply colored.

She had poised there for the mere survey of

a new gown, but after a moment of dwelling on her own reflection she found herself considering it only as an object in the foreground of a picture. That picture, seen through the open door, reflected in the glass, was all of a bright, hard glitter, all a high, harsh tone of newness. In its paneled oak, in its glare of cut-glass and silver, in the shining vacant faces of its floors and walls, there was not a color that filled the eye, not a shadow where imagination could find play. As a background for herself it struck her as incongruous. Like a child looking at the landscape upside down, she felt herself in a foreign country. Yet it was hers. She turned about to bring it into familiar association. There was nothing wrong with it. But its great capacity suggested large parties rather than close intimacies. In the high lift of its ceilings, the ample openings of its doors, the swept, garnished, polished beauty of its cold surfaces, it proclaimed itself conceived, created and decorated for large, fine functions. She thought whimsically that any one who knew her, coming into her house, would

realize that some one other than herself had the ordering of it.

She glanced over the table. It was set for three. It lacked nothing but the serving of dinner. She looked at the clock. It wanted a few minutes to the hour. Shima, the Japanese butler, came in softly with the evening papers. She took them from him. Nothing bored her so much as a paper, but to-night she knew it contained something she really wanted to see. She opened one of the damp sheets at the page of sales.

There it was at the head of the column in thick black type:

AT AUCTION, FEBRUARY 18
PERSONAL ESTATE OF
ELIZABETH HUNTER CHATWORTH
CONSISTING OF ——

She read the details with interest down to the end, where the name of the "famous Chatworth ring" finished the announcement with a flourish. Why "famous"? It was very provoking to ad-

vertise with that vague adjective and not explain it.

She turned indifferently to the first page. She read a sentence, re-read it, read it again. Then, as if she could not read fast enough, her eyes galloped down the column. Color came into her cheeks. The grasp of her hands on the edges of the paper tightened. It was the most extraordinary thing! She was bewildered with the feeling that what was blazing at her from the columns of the paper was at once the wildest thing that could possibly have happened, and yet the one most to have been expected.

For, from the first the business had been sinister, from as far back as the tragedy—the end of poor young Chatworth and his wife—the Bessie, who, before her English marriage, they had all known so well. Her death, that had befallen in far Italian Alps, had made a sensation in their little city, and the large announcements of auction that had followed hard upon it had bred among the women who had known her a morbid excitement, a feverish desire to buy,

as if there might be some special luck in them, the jewels of a woman who had so tragically died. They had been ready to make a social affair of the private view held in the "Maple Room" before the auction. And now the whole spectacular business was capped by a sensation so dramatic as to strain credulity to its limit. She could not believe it; yet here it was glaring at her from the first page. Still—it might be an exaggeration, a mistake. She must go back to the beginning and read it over slowly.

The striking of the hour hurried her. Shima's announcement of dinner only sent her eyes faster down the page. But when, with a faint, smooth rustle, Mrs. Britton came in, she let the paper fall. She always faced her chaperon with a little nervousness, and with the same sense of strangeness with which she so frequently regarded her house.

"It's fifteen minutes after eight," Mrs. Britton observed. "We would better not wait any longer."

She took the place opposite Flora's at the

round table. Flora sat down, still holding the paper, flushed and bolt upright with her news.

"It's the most extraordinary thing!" she burst forth.

Mrs. Britton paused mildly with a radish in her fingers. She took in the presence of the paper, and the suppressed excitement of her companion's face—seemed to absorb them through the large pupils of her light eyes, through all her smooth, pretty person, before she reached for an explanation.

"What is the most extraordinary thing?" The query came bland and smooth, as if, whatever it was, it could not surprise her.

"Why, the Chatworth ring! At the private view this afternoon it simply vanished! And—and it was all our own crowd who were there!"

"Vanished!" Clara Britton leaned forward, peering hard in the face of this extraordinary statement. "Stolen, do you mean?" She made it definite.

Flora flung out her hands.

"Well, it disappeared in the Maple Room, in

the middle of the afternoon, when everybody was there—and they haven't the faintest clue."

"But how?" For a moment the preposterous fact left Clara too quick to be calm.

Again Flora's eloquent hands. "That is it! It was in a case like all the other jewels. Harry saw it"—she glanced at the paper—"as late as four o'clock. When he came back with Judge Buller, half an hour after, it was gone."

Flora leaned forward on her elbows, chin in hands. No two could have differed more than these two women in their blondness and their prettiness and their wonder. For Clara was sharp and pale, with silvery lights in eyes and hair, and confronted the facts with an alert and calculating observation; but Flora was tawny, toned from brown to ivory through all the gamut of gold—hair color of a panther's hide, eyes dark hazel, glinting through dust-colored lashes, chin round like a fruit. The pressure of her fingers accented the slight uptilt of her brows to elfishness, and her look was introspective. She might, instead of wondering on the

outside, have been the very center of the mystery itself, toying with unthinkable possibilities of revelation. She looked far over the head of Clara Britton's annoyance that there should be no clue.

"Why, don't you see," she pointed out, "that is just the fun of it? It might be anybody. It might be you, or me, or Ella Buller. Though I would much prefer to think it was some one we didn't know so well—some one strange and fascinating, who will presently go slipping out the Golden Gate in a little junk boat, so that no one need be embarrassed."

Clara looked back with extraordinary intentness.

"Oh, it's not possible the thing is stolen. There's some mistake! And if it were"—her eyes seemed to open a little wider to take in this possibility—"they will have detectives all around the water front by to-night. Any one would find it difficult to get away," she pointed out. "You see, the ring is an important piece of property."

"Of course; I know," Flora murmured. A faint twitch of humor pulled her mouth, but the passionate romantic color was dying out of her face. How was it that one's romances could be so cruelly pulled down to earth? She ought to have learned by this time, she thought, never to fly her little flag of romance except to an empty horizon—never, at least, to fly it in Clara's face. It was always as promptly surrounded by Clara's common sense as San Francisco would be surrounded by the police. But still she couldn't quite come down to Clara. "At least," she sighed, "he has saved me an awful expense, whoever took it, for I should have had to have it."

Mrs. Britton surveyed this statement considerингly. "Was it the most valuable thing in the collection?"

Flora hesitated in the face of the alert question. "I—don't know. But it was the most remarkable. It was a Chatworth heirloom, the papers say, and was given to Bessie at the time of her marriage." The thought of the death

that had so quickly followed that marriage gave Flora a little shiver, but no shade of the tragedy touched Clara. There was nothing but speculation in Clara's eyes—that, and a little disappointment. "Then they will put off the auction—if it is really so," she mused.

"Oh, yes," Flora mourned, "they can put it off as long as they please. The only thing I wanted is gone—and I hadn't even seen it."

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure. There may be some mistake about it. The papers love a sensation."

"But there must be something in it, Clara. Why, they closed the doors and searched them—*that* crowd! It's ridiculous!"

Clara Britton glanced at the empty place. "Then that must be what has kept him."

"Who? Oh, Harry!" It took Flora a moment to remember she had been expecting Harry. She hoped Clara had not noticed it. Clara always had too much the assumption that she was taking him only as the best-looking, best-natured, safest bargain presented. "He will be

here," she reassured, "but I wish he would hurry. His dinner will be spoiled; and, poor dear, he likes his dinner so much!"

The faint silver sound of the electric bell, a precipitate double peal, seemed to uphold this statement. The women faced each other in a moment's suspense, a moment of expectation, such as the advance column may feel at sight of a scout hotfoot from the field of battle. There were muffled movements in the hall, then light, even steps crossing the drawing-room. Those light steps always suggested a slight frame, and, as always, Flora was re-surprised at his bulk as now it appeared between the parted curtains, the dull black and sharp white of his evening clothes topped by his square, fresh-colored face.

"Well, Flora," he said, "I know I'm late," and took the hand she held to him from where she sat. Her face danced with pleasure. Yes, he was magnificent, she thought, as he crossed with his light stride to Mrs. Britton's chair. He could even stand the harsh lines and lights of even-

ing clothes. He dominated their ugly convention with his height, his face so ruddy and fresh under the pale brown of his hair, his alert, assured, deft movement. His high good nature had the effect of sweetening for him even Clara Britton's flavorless manner. The "We were speaking of you," with which she saw him to his seat, had all the warmth of a smile, but a smile far in the background of Flora's immediate possession. Indeed, Flora had seldom had so much to say to Harry as at this moment of her excitement over what he had actually seen. For the evidence that he had seen something was vivid in his face. She had never found him so splendidly alive. She had never seen him, it came to her, quite like this before.

She shook the paper at him. "Tell us everything, instantly!"

He gaily acknowledged her right to make him thus stand and deliver. He shot his hands into the air with the lightening vivacity that was in him a sort of wit. "Not guilty," he grinned at her.

"Harry, you know you were in it. The papers have you the most important personage."

"Oh, not all that," he denied her allegation. "They had the whole lot of us cooped up together for investigation for as much as two hours. I thought I shouldn't have time to dress! I'm as hungry as a hawk!" He rolled it out with the full gusto with which he was by this time engaged on his first course.

"Poor dear," said Flora with cooing mock-sympathy, "and did they starve it? But would it mind telling us, now that it has its food, what is true, and what was the gallant part it played this afternoon?"

"Well," he followed her whimsical lead, "the chief detective and I were the star performers. I found the ring wasn't there, and he found he couldn't find it."

"Don't you know any more than the paper?" Flora mourned.

"Considerably less—if I know the papers." He grinned with a fine flash of even teeth. "What do you want me to say?"

"Why, stupid, the adventures of Harry Cressy, Esquire. How did you feel?"

"Thirsty."

"Oh, Harry!" She glanced about, as if for a missile to threaten him with.

"Upon my word! But look here—wait a minute!" he arrived deliberately at what was required of him. "Never mind how I felt; but if you want to know the way it happened—here's your Maple Room." He began a diagram with forks on the cloth before him, and Clara, who had watched their sparring from her point of vantage in the background, now leaned forward, as if at last they were getting to the point.

"This is the case, furthest from the door." He planted a salt-cellar in his silver inclosure. "I come in very early, at half-past two, before the crowd; fail to meet you there." He made mischievous bows to right and left. "I go out again. But first I see this ring."

"What was it like?" Flora demanded.

"Like?" Harry turned a speculative eye to the dull glow of the candelabrum, as if between

its points of flame he conjured up the vision of the vanished jewel. "Like a bit of an old gold heathen god curled round himself, with his head, which was mostly two yellow sapphires, between his knees, and a big, blue stone on top. Soft, yellow gold, so fine you could almost dent it. And carved! Even through a glass every line of it is right." He paused and ran the tip of his finger along the silver outline of his diagram, as if the mere memory of the precious eyes of the little god had power to arrest all other consideration. "Well, there he was," he pulled himself up, "and I can't remember when a thing of that sort has stayed by me so. I couldn't seem to get away from it. I dropped into the club and talked to Buller about it. He got keen, and I went back with him to have another look at it. Well, at the door Buller stops to speak to a chap going out—a crazy Englishman he had picked up at the club. I go on. By this time there's a crowd inside, but I manage to get up to the case. And first I miss the spot altogether. And then I see the card with his name; and then, under-

neath I see the hole in the velvet where the god has been."

Flora gave out a little sigh of suspense, and even Clara showed a gleam of excitement. He looked from one to the other. "Then there were fireworks. Buller came up. The detective came up. Everybody came up. Nobody'd believe it. Lots of 'em thought they had seen it only a few minutes before. But there was the hole in the velvet—and nothing more to be found."

"But does no one know anything? Has no one an idea?" Clara almost panted in her impatience.

"Not the ghost of a glimmer of a clue. There were upward of two hundred of us, and they let us out like a chain-gang, one by one. My number was one hundred and ninety-three, and so far I can vouch there were no discoveries. It has vanished—sunk out of sight."

Flora sighed. "Oh, poor Bessie Chatworth!" It came out with a quick inconsequence that made Clara—even in her impatience—ever so faintly smile. "It seems so cruel to have your things

taken like that when you're dead, and can't help it," Flora rather lamely explained. "I should hate it."

Harry stared at her. "Oh, come. I guess you wouldn't care." His eyes rested for a moment on the fine flare of jewels presented by Flora's clasped hands. "Besides,"—his voice dropped to a graver level—"the deuce of it is—" he paused, they, both rather breathless, looking at him. He had the air of a man about to give information, and then the air of a man who has thought better of it. His voice consciously shook off its gravity. "Well, there'll be such a row kicked up, the probability is the thing'll be returned and no questions asked. Purdie's keen —very keen. He's responsible, the executor of the estate, you see."

But Clara Britton leveled her eyes at him, as if the thing he had produced was not at all the thing he had led up to. "Still, unless there was enormous pressure somewhere—and in this case I don't see where—I can't see what Mr. Purdie's keenness will do toward getting it back."

Harry played a little sulkily with the proposition, but he would not pick up the thread he had dropped. "I don't know that any one sees. The question now is—who took it?"

"Why, one of us," said Flora flippantly. "Of course, it is all on the Western Addition."

"Don't you believe it!" he answered her. "It's a confounded fine professional job. It takes more than sleight of hand—it takes genius, a thing like that!"

Flora gave him a quick glance, but he had not spoken flippantly. He was serious in his admiration. She didn't quite fancy his tone. "Why, Harry," she protested, "you talk as if you admired him!"

At this he laughed. "Well, how do you know I don't? But I can tell you one thing"—he dropped back into the same tone again—"there's no local crook work in this affair. It should be some one big—some one—" He frowned straight before him. He shook his head and smiled. "There was a chap in England, Farrell Wand."

The name floated in a little silence.

"He kept them guessing," Harry went on recalling it; "did some great vanishing acts."

"You mean he could take things before their eyes without people knowing it?" Flora's eyes were wide beyond their wont.

"Something of that sort. I remember at one of the Embassy balls at St. James' he talked five minutes to Lady Tilton. Her emeralds were on when he began. She never saw 'em again."

Flora began to laugh. "He must have been attractive."

"Well," Harry conceded practically, "he knew his business."

"But you can't rely on those stories," Clara objected.

"You must this time," he shook his tawny head at her; "I give you my word; for I was there."

It seemed to Flora fairly preposterous that Harry could sit there looking so matter-of-fact with such experiences behind him. Even Clara

looked a little taken aback, but the effect was only to set her more sharply on.

"Then such a man could easily have taken the ring in the Maple Room this afternoon? You think it might have been the man himself?"

His broad smile of appreciation enveloped her. "Oh, you have a scent like a bloodhound. You haven't let go of that once since you started. He could have done it—oh, easy—but he went out eight, ten years ago."

"Died?" Flora's rising inflection was a lament.

"Went over the horizon—over the range. Believe he died in the colonies."

"Oh," Flora sighed, "then I shall have to fancy he has come back again, just for the sake of the Chatworth ring. That wouldn't be too strange. It's all so strange I keep forgetting it is real. At least," she went on explaining herself to Harry's smile, "it seems as if this must be going on a long way off, as if it couldn't be so close to us, as if the ring I wanted so much couldn't really be the one that has disappeared."

All the while she felt Harry's smile enveloping her with an odd, half-protecting watchfulness, but at the close of her sentence he frowned a little.

"Well, perhaps we can find another ring to take the place of it."

She felt that she had been stupid where she should have been most delicate. "But you don't understand," she protested, leaning far toward him as if to coerce him with her generous warmth. "The Chatworth ring was nothing but a fancy I had. I never thought of it for a moment as an engagement ring!"

By the light stir of silk she was aware that Clara had risen. She looked up quickly to encounter that odd look. Clara's face was so smooth, so polished, so unruffled, as to appear almost blank, but none the less Flora saw it all in Clara's eye—a look that was not new to her. It was the same with which Clara had met the announcement of her engagement; the same look with which she had confronted every allusion to the approaching marriage; the same with

which she now surveyed the mention of the engagement ring—a look neither approving nor dissenting, whose calm, considerate speculation seemed to repudiate all interest positive or negative in the approaching event except the one large question, "What is to become of me?" Many times Clara had held it up before her, not as a question, certainly not as an accusation; as a flat assertion of fact; but to-night Flora felt it so directly and imperatively aimed at her that it seemed this time to demand an audible response. And Clara's way of getting up, and standing there, with her gloves on, poised and expectant, as if she were only waiting an opportunity to take farewell, took on, in the light of her look, the fantastic appearance of a final departure. "I'm afraid," she mildly reminded them, "that Shima announced the carriage ten minutes ago."

"Oh, dear, I'm so sorry!" Flora's eyes wavered apologetically in the direction of the waiting Japanese. Clara's flicker of amusement made her hate herself the moment it was out.

She could always depend on herself when she knew she was on exhibition. She could be sure of the right thing if it were only large enough, but she was still caught at odd moments by the trifles, the web of a certain social habit into which she had slipped, full grown on the smooth surface of her father's millions. Clara's fleeting smile lit up these trifles to her now as enormous. It took advantage of her small deficit to point out to her more plainly than ever to what large blunders she might be liable when she had cut loose from Clara's guiding, reminding, prompting genius, and chose to confront the world without it.

To be sure, she was not to confront it alone; but, looking at Harry, it came to her with a moment's qualm that she did not know him as well as she had thought.

II

A NAME GOES ROUND A TABLE

FOR to-night, from the moment he had appeared, she had recognized an unfamiliar mood in him, and it had come out more the more they had discussed the Chatworth ring. It was not in any special word or action on his part. It was in his whole presence that she felt the difference, as if the afternoon's scandal had been a stimulant to him—not through its romantic aspect, as it had affected her, but merely by the daring of the theft itself.

She wondered, as he heaped her ermine on her shoulders, if Harry might not have more surprises for her than she had supposed. Perhaps she had taken him too much for granted. After all, she had known him only for a year.

She herself was but three years old in San

Francisco, and to her new eyes Harry had seemed an old resident thoroughly established. So firmly established was he in his bachelor quarters, in his clubs, in the demands made upon him by the city's society, that it had never occurred to her he had ever lived anywhere else. Nor had he happened to mention anything of his previous life until to-night, when he had given her, in that mention of a London ball, one flashing glimpse of former experiences.

Impulsively she summed up the possibilities of what these might have been. She gave him a look, incredulous, delighted, as he handed her into the carriage. She had actually got a thrill out of easy-going, matter-of-fact, well-tubbed Harry! It was a comradeship in itself. Not that she would have told him. This capacity of hers for thrills she had found need always to keep carefully covered. In the days when she was a shoeless child—those days of her father's labor in shaft and dump—she had dimly felt her world to be a creature of a keen, a fairly cruel humor, for all things that did not pertain to the

essence of the life it struggled for. The wonder of the western flare of day, the magic in the white eyes of the stars before sunrise, the mystery in the pulse of the pounding mine heard in the dark—of such it had been as ruthless as this new world that looked as narrowly forth at as starved a prospect with even keener ridicule. Instinctively she had turned to both the hard, bright face they required. It seemed that in the world at large this faculty of hers was queer. And to be queer, to have anything that other people had not, except money, was to be open to suspicion. And yet from the first she had had to be queer.

Fatherless, motherless, alone upon the pinnacle of her fortune, she had known that such an extraordinary entrance, even at this rather wide social portal, would only be acceptable if toned down, glossed over, and drawn out by a personality sufficiently neutral, sufficiently potent, and sufficiently in need of what she had to give. The successive flickers of the gas-lamps through the carriage window made of Clara's

profile so hard and fine a little medallion that it was impossible to conceive it in need of anything. And yet it was just their mutual need that had drawn these two women together, and after three years it was still the only thing that held them. As much of a fight as she had put up with the rest—the people who had taken her in—she had put up the hardest with Clara. Yet of them all Clara was the only one she had failed to capture. Clara was always there in the middle of her affairs, but surveying them from a distance, and Flora's struggle with her had resolved itself into the attempt to keep her from seeing too much, from seeing more than she herself saw. Clara's seeing, thus far, had always been to help, but Flora sometimes wondered whether in an emergency this help could be depended on—whether Clara could give anything without exacting a price.

Their dubious intimacy had created for Flora a special sort of loneliness—a loneliness which lacked the security of solitude; and it was partly as an escape from this that she had accepted

Harry Cressy. By herself she could never have escaped. The initiative was not hers. But he had presented himself, he had insisted, had overruled her objections, had captured her before she knew whether she wanted it or not—and held her now, fascinated by his very success in capturing her, and by his beautiful ruddy masculinity. She did not ask herself whether women ever married for greater reasons than these. She only wondered sometimes if he did not stand out more brilliantly against Clara and the others than he intrinsically was. But these moments when she was obliged to defend him to herself were always when he was not with her. Even in the dusky carriage she had been as aware of the splendor of his attraction as now when they had stopped between the high lamps of the club entrance, and she saw clearly the broad lines of his shoulders and the stoop of his square-set head as he stepped swingingly to the pavement. After all, she ought to be glad to think that he was going to stand up as tall and protectingly between her and the world, as now he did between

her and the press of people which, like a tide of water, swept them forward down the hall, sucked them back in its eddy, and finally cast them, ruffled like birds that have ridden a storm, on the more generous space of the wide, upward stair.

From here, looking down on the current sweeping past them, the little islands of black coats seemed fairly drowned in the feminine sea around them—the flow of white, of pale blue and rose, and the high chatter, like a cage of birds, that for the evening held possession.

"Ladies' Night!" Harry Cressy mopped his flushed face. "It's awful!"

Flora laughed in the effervescence of her spirits. She wanted to know, teasingly, as they mounted, if this were why he had brought two more to add to the lot. He only looked at her, with his short note of laughter that made her keenly conscious of his right to be proud of her. She was proud of herself, inasmuch as herself was shown in the long trail of daring blue her gown made up the stair, and the powdery blue of the aigrette that shivered in her bright,

soft puffs and curls—proud that her daring, as it appeared in these things, was still discriminating enough to make her right.

She could recall a time when she had not even been quite sure of her clothes. Not Clara's subdued rustle at her side could make her doubt them now; but her security was still recent enough to be sometimes conscious of itself. It was so short a time since all these talking groups, that made a personage of her, had had the power to put her quite out of countenance. The women who craned over their shoulders to speak to her—how hard she had had to work to make them see her at all! And now she did not know which she felt more like laughing at, herself or them, for having taken it so seriously. For, when one thought of it, wasn't it absurd that people out of nowhere should suppose themselves exclusive? And people out of nowhere they were, herself and all the rest of them. From causes not far dissimilar they had drifted or scrambled to where they now stood. It was a question of squatter rights. The first on the

ground were dictators, and how long they could hold their claim against invaders a dubious cast of fate. For there were for ever fresh invasions, and departures; swift risings from obscurity, sudden fallings back into oblivion, brilliant shootings through of strange meteors; and in the tide of fluctuation, the things that were established or traditional upon this coast of chance were mere islands in the wash of ocean. It was amazing, it was almost frightening, the fluid, unstable quality of life; the rapid, inconsequent changes; yet it was also this very quality of transformation that most stirred and delighted her.

And to-night it was not the picture exhibition, nor the function itself that elated her, but the fancy she had as she looked over the moving mass below her that the crowning excitement of the day, the vanishing mystery, hovered over them all. It was fantastic, but it persisted; for had not the Chatworth ring itself proved that the most ordinary appearances might cover unimagined wonders? Which of those bland, satis-

fied faces might not change shockingly at the whisper "Chatworth" in its ear? She wanted to confide the naughty thought to Harry. But no, he wasn't the one. If Harry were apprehensive of anything at all it was only of being caught in too hot a crush. He saw no possibilities in the mob below except boredom. He saw no possibilities in the evening but his conventional duty; and Flora could read in his eye his intention of getting through that as comfortably as possible. His suggestion that they have a look at the pictures brought the two women's eyes together in a rare gleam of mutual mirth. They knew he suspected that the picture gallery would be the emptiest place in the club, since to have a look at the pictures was what they were all supposed to be there for. That was so infallibly the note of their life, Flora thought, as she followed up the wide sweep of the middle stair, and along the high-ceiled, gilded hall whose open arches overlooked the rooms below.

The picture gallery was new, an addition; and the plain, narrow, unexpected door in this

place, where all was high, arched, elaborate and flourished, was like a loophole through which to slip into a foreign atmosphere. This atmosphere was resinous of fresh wood; the light was thick with drifting motes; the carpets harshly new, slipping beneath the feet on the too polished floor; the bare bones of the place yet scarcely covered. But its quiet was after all comparative. There were plenty of people lingering in groups in the center of the gallery which was dusky, eclipsed by the great reflectors that circled the room, throwing out the pictures in a bright band of color around the walls. People leaning from this border of light back into the dusk to murmur together, vanished and reappeared with such fascinating abruptness that Flora caught herself guessing what sort of face, where this nearest group stood just on the edge of shadow, would pop out of the dark next.

She was ready for something extraordinary, but now, when it came, she was taken aback by it. It gave her a start, that toss of black hair, that long, irregular, pale face whose scintillant,

sardonic smile was mercilessly upon the poor, inadequate picture-face fronting him. His stoop above the rail was so abrupt that his long, lean back was almost horizontal, yet even thus there was something elegant in the swing of him—in the careless twist of his head, around, to speak to the woman behind him. The light above struck blind on the glass in one eye, but the other danced with a genial, a mad scintillation. The light of it caught like contagion, and touched the merest glancer at him with the spark of its warm, ironic mirth. The question which naturally rose to Flora's lips—"Who in the world is that?"—she checked; why, she didn't ask herself. She only felt as she followed Clara, trailing away across the floor, that the interest of the evening which had promised so well, beginning with the Chatworth ring, had been raised even a note higher. Her restive fancy was beginning again. All the footlights of her little secret stage were up.

Clara turned to the right, following a beckoning fan, and Flora, dallying with her anticipa-

tion, reasoned that now they must circle the room before they should face him—the interesting apparition. It was a pilgrimage of which he on the other side was performing his half. Perfunctorily talking from group to group, conscious now and again of the lagging Clara or Harry, she could nevertheless keep a sly eye on the stranger's equal progress. The flash of jet, and the voluble, substantial shoulders of the lady so profusely introducing him, were an assurance of how that pilgrimage would terminate, since it was Ella Buller who was parading him. She even wondered before which of the florid pictures at the far, other end of the room, as before a shrine, the ceremony would take place.

She kept her eyes fixed on the paintings before her, and as she moved down from one to another, and the voices of the approaching group drew nearer, one separated itself from the general murmur, so clear, so resonantly carried, so clean-clipped off the tongue, that it stood out in syllables on the blur of sound which was Ella Buller's conversation. It had color,

that voice; it had a quality so sharp, so individual that it touched her with a mischievous wonder that he dared speak so differently from all the world about him. Then, six pictures away, she heard her own name.

"Why, Flora Gilsey!" It was Ella's husky, boyish note. "I've been looking for you all the evening! How d'y'do, Harry?" She waved her hand at him. "Why, how d'y'do, Mrs. Britton? I wouldn't let papa go to supper until I'd found you. 'Papa,' I said, 'wait; Flora and Harry will be here.' Besides," she had quite reached Flora's side by this time and communicated it in an impressive whisper, "I want you to meet my Englishman." She looked over her shoulder, and largely beckoned to where the blunt and florid Buller and his companion, with their backs to what they were supposed to be looking at, were exchanging an anecdote of infinite amusement.

Buller's expression came around slowly to his daughter's beckoning hand, but the Englishman's face seemed to flash at the instant from what he was enjoying to what was expected of

him. In the flourish of introductions, across and across, Flora found herself thinking the reality less extraordinary than she had at first supposed. Now that Mr. Kerr was fairly before her, presented to her, and taking her in with the same lively, impersonal interest with which he took in the whole room, "as if," she put it vexedly to herself, "I were a specimen poked at him on the end of a pin," it stirred in her a vague resentment; and involuntarily she held him up to Harry. The comparison showed him a little worn, a little battered, a little too perfunctory in manner; but his genial eyes, deep under threatening brows, made Harry's eyes seem to stare rather coldly; and the fine form of his long, plain face, and the sensitive line of his long thin lips made Harry's beauty look,—well, how did it look? Hardly callous.

This mixed impression the two men gave her was disconcerting. She was all the more ready to be wary of the stranger. She had begun with him in the way she did with every one—instinctively throwing out a breastwork of conversa-

tion from behind which she could observe the enemy. But though he had blinked at it, he had not taken her up, nor helped her out; but had merely stood with his head a little canted forward, as if he watched her through her defenses.

"But San Francisco must seem so limited after London," she had wound up; and the way he had considered it, a little humorously, down his long nose, made her doubt the interest of cities to be reckoned in round numbers.

"It's all extraordinary," he said. "You're quite as extraordinary in your way as we in ours."

"Oh," she wondered, still vexed with his inventory, "I had always supposed us awfully commonplace. What *is* our way, please?"

"Ah," he said, measuring his long step to hers as they sauntered a little, "for one thing, you're so awfully good to a fellow. In London"—and he nodded back, as if London were merely across the room—"they're awfully good to the somebodies. It's the way you take in the nobodies over here that is so astonishing—the stray

leaves that blow in with your 'trade,' and can't show any credentials but a letter or two, and their faces; and those"—his *diablerie* danced out again—"sometimes such deucedly damaged ones."

It was almost indecent, this parade of his non-entity! She wanted to say, "Oh, hush! Those are the things one only enjoys—never talks about." But instead, somewhere up at the top of her voice, she said: "Oh, we always lock up our silver!"

"But even then," he quizzed her, "I wonder how you dare to do it?"

"Perhaps we have to, because we ourselves are all—" ("without any credentials but those you mention,") she had been about to say—but there she caught herself on the very edge of giving herself and all the rest of them away to him; "—all so awfully bored," she mischievously ended with the daintiest, faintest possible yawn behind her spread fan.

He looked as if she had taken him by surprise; then laughed out. "Oh, that is the way they

don't do here," he provoked her. "You mustn't, when I'm not expecting it."

"Then what are you expecting?" she inquired a little coolly.

"Well," he deliberated, "not expecting you to get me ready for a sweet, and then pop in a pickle; and presently expecting, hoping, anxiously anticipating, what you really care to say."

He was expecting, she looked maliciously, more than he was likely to get; but the fact that he did see through her to that extent was at once delightful and alarming. She swayed back into the shadow beyond the dazzling line of light. She wanted to escape his scrutiny, to be able to look him over from a safe vantage-ground. But he wouldn't have it. An instant he stood under the torrent of white radiance, challenging her to see what she could—then followed her into her retreat. "Shall we sit here?" he said, and she found herself hopelessly cut off and isolated with the enemy.

She couldn't withhold a little grudging pleasure in the sharpness with which he had turned

her maneuver, and the way it had detached them from the surrounding crowd. For there, in the dusky center of the room, it was as if they watched from safe covert the rest of their party exposed in the glare of light; though not, as Flora presently noted, quite escaping observation themselves. For an instant Harry turned and peered toward them with a look in his intentness that struck Flora as something new in him, and made her wonder if he could be jealous. She turned tentatively to see if Kerr had noticed it, and surprised his glance in a quick transition back to hers.

"By your leave," he said, and took away her fan, which in his hand presently assumed such rhythmic motion that it ceased to be any more present to her than a delicate current of air upon her face. Her face, which in the first place he had so well looked over, he now looked into with something more personal in his quest, as if under the low brows and crowding lashes there was a puzzle to solve in the timid, unassured glances of such splendid eyes.

He was not, she felt sure, in spite of his light manipulation of her fan, a person who cared to please women, but one of that devastating sort who care above everything to please themselves, and who are skilful without practice; too skilful, she feared, for her defenses to hold out against if he intended to find out what she really thought. "Aren't we supposed to be looking at the pictures?" she wanted to know.

He turned his back on the wall and its attendant glare. "Why pictures," he inquired, "when there are live people to look at? Pictures for places where they're all half dead. But here, where even the damnable dust in the street is alive, why should they paint, or write, or sculpt, or do anything but live?" His irascible brows shot the query at her.

Again the proposition of life—whatever that was—was held up before her, and as ever she faltered in the face of it. "I suppose they do it here," she murmured, with a vague glance at the paintings around her, "because people do it everywhere else."

His disparagement was almost a snarl. "That's the rotten part of it—because they do it everywhere else! As if there wasn't enough monotony in the world already without every chap trying to be like the next instead of being himself!"

"Ah!" Her small, uncertain smile in the midst of her outward splendor was pathetic. "But it is different to you. You're a man. You're not one of us."

"One of what? I'm a man. I'm myself. Which, pardon me, dear lady, is just what you won't be—yourself."

"But if you have to be what people expect?" She clung to her first principle of safety in the midst of this onslaught.

"People don't want what they expect—if you care for that." He waved it away with his quick, white hand.

"But you have to care, unless you want to be queer." Her poor little secret was out before she knew, and he looked at it, laughing immoderately, yet somehow delightfully.

"Ah, if you think the social game is the game that counts! I had expected braver things of you. The game that counts, my girl," he preached it at her with his long white hand, "the game that is going on out here is the big, red game of life. That's the only one that's worth a guinea; and there's no winning or losing, there's no right or wrong to it, and it doesn't matter what a man is in it as long as he's a good one."

"Even if he is a thief?" The question was out of Flora's lips before she could catch it. It was a challenge. She had meant to confound him; but he caught it as if it delighted him.

"Well, what would you think?"

He threw it back at her.

What hadn't she thought! How persistently her fancy had played with the question of what sort of man that one might be who had so wonderfully put his hand under a glass case and drawn out the Chatworth ring. Why, outwardly, he must have been like all the crowd around him, to have escaped unnoticed; but, in-

wardly, how much superior in power and skill to have so completely overreached them!

"Oh," she laughed dubiously, "I suppose he is a good one as long as he isn't caught."

"What!" His face disowned her. "You think he's a renegade, do you? A chap in perpetual flight, taking things because he has to, more or less pursued by the law? Bah! It's a guild as old, and a deal more honorable, than the beggar's. Your good thief is born to it. It's his caste. It's in his blood. It isn't money that he wants. If he had a million he'd be the same. And it isn't a mania either. It's a profession." The Englishman leaned back and smiled at her over the elegance of his long, joined fingertips.

She looked at him with a delighted alarm, with an increasing elation; but whether these arose from his lawless declarations and the singular way they kept setting before her more vividly moment by moment the possible character of the present keeper of the Chatworth ring, or whether it was just the sight of Kerr himself as

he sat there that stirred her, she didn't try to distinguish.

"But suppose he was your own thief," she urged; "took your own things, I mean," she hastily amended, "and suppose he turned out to be—some one you knew and liked—" She hesitated. She had come at last to what she really wanted to say. She had brought out a question that had been teasing her fancy at intervals all the while he had been talking, and he hadn't even heard it. He wasn't even looking at her. She had caught him off his guard. He was looking across her shoulder straight down the dim vista of the room to the little blaze of bordering light. He was looking at Harry. No, Harry was looking at him. Harry was looking with a steady, an intent gaze, and Kerr meeting it—it might have been merely the blank glare of his monocle—seemed, to Flora, to meet it a little insolently. She fancied in the instant something to pass between the two men, something which, this time, she did not mistake for jealousy—a shade too dim for defiance or suspicion, a deep

scrutiny that struggled to place something, some one.

Flora felt a sudden wish to break that curious scrutiny. It had broken her little moment. It had shattered the personal, almost intimate note that had been sounded between them. The look Kerr turned back to her was vague, and stirred in her a dim resentment that he could drop it all so easily.

"Shall we join the others?" It was the voice with which she had begun with him, but her eyes were hot through their light mist of lashes, and he threw her a comprehending glance of amusement.

"Oh, no," he assured her, "we can't help ourselves. They are going to join us."

Ella Buller, in the van of her procession, was already descending upon them. Her approach dissipated the last remnant of their personal moment. Her presence always insisted that there was nothing worth while but instant participation in her geniality, and whatever subject it might at the moment be taken up with. This

conviction of Ella's had been wont to overawe Flora, and it still overwhelmed her; so that now, as she followed in the tail of Ella's marshaled force, she had a guilty feeling that there should be nothing in her mind but a normal desire for supper.

Yet all the way down the great stair, "the Corridors of Time," where the white owl glared his glassy wisdom on the passings and counter-passings, she was haunted with the thought that Harry had seen the extraordinary Kerr before; not shaken hands with him, perhaps—perhaps not even heard his name; but somewhere, across some distance, once glimpsed him, and had never quite shaken the memory from his mind. For there was something marked, notable, unforgetable in that lean distinctiveness. Against the sleek form of the men they met and shook hands with, he flashed out—seemed in contrast fairly electric. She saw him, just ahead of her where the crowd was thickening in the door of the supper-room, making way for Clara through the press with that exasperating solicitude of his

that was half ironic. And the large broadside offered by her elegant Harry, matter-of-factly towing Ella by the elbow, herself conscious of a curl or two awry, and Judge Buller tramping heavily at her side, all took on to her the aspect of a well-chosen peep-show with the satanic Kerr officiating as showman. Even the smooth and pallid Clara, who usually coerced by her sheer correctness, failed to dominate this fantastic image; rather, she took on, as she was handed into the supper-room, the aspect of his chief exhibit.

The room, hot, polished, flaring reflections of electric lights from its glistening floor, announced itself the heart of high festivity, through the midst of which their entrance made an added ripple. The flushed faces of the women under their flowers, under their pale-tinted hats, with their smiling recognitions to Clara, to Flora, to Ella, smiled with a sharpened interest. It proclaimed that Kerr was a stranger, and, in a circle which found itself a little stale for lack of innovations, a desirable one.

Exclamatory greetings, running into skirmishes of talk, here and there halted their progress, and even after they had settled about their table in the center of the room the attention of one and another was drawn over the shoulder to some special, trans-table recognition.

Apparently the dominant note of their party was Ella's clamorous selection for the supper; but to Flora the more real thing was the atmosphere of excitement and mystery she had been moving in all the evening. She was pursued by the obsession of something more about to happen—something imminent—though, of course, nothing would; at least, how could anything happen here, to them? And by "them," she meant herself and these people around her so stupidly talking—the eternal repetition of the story she had read out that evening to Clara, and not one glimmer of light! She wondered if her obsession was all her own—or did it reach to one of them? Certainly not Ella; not Judge Buller, settled into his collar, choosing champagnes. Clara? She had to skip Clara. One never knew whether

Clara had not more behind her smooth prettiness than ever she brought to light. Kerr? Perhaps. With him she felt potentialities enormous. Harry? Never. Harry was being appealed to by all the women who could get at him as to his part in the affair—what had been his sensations and emotions? But Flora knew perfectly well he had had none. He was only oppressed by the attention his fame in the matter, and the central position of their table, brought upon him. Protesting, he made his part as small as possible.

"Oh, confound it, if I can't get at my oysters!" he complained, leaning back into his group again with a sigh.

"You divide the honors with the mysterious unknown, eh?" Kerr inquired across the table.

"Hang it, there's no division! I'd offer you a share!" Harry laughed, and it occurred to Flora how much Kerr could have made of it.

"Purdie'd like to share something," Buller vouchsafed. "He's been pawing the air ever since Crew cabled, and this has blown him up completely."

"Crew?" Flora wondered. Here was something more happening. Crew? She had not heard that name before. It made a stir among them all; but if Kerr looked sharp, Clara looked sharper. She looked at Harry and Harry was vexed.

"Who's Crew?" said Ella; and the judge looked around on the silence.

"Why, bless my soul, isn't it— Oh, anyway, it will all be out to-morrow. But I thought Harry'd told you. The Chatworth ring wasn't Bessie's."

It had the effect of startling them all apart, and then drawing them closer together again around the table over the uncorked bottles.

"Why," Judge Buller went on, "this ring is a celebrated thing. It's the 'Crew Idol'!" He threw the name out as if that in itself explained everything, but the three women, at least, were blank.

"Why celebrated?" Clara objected. "The stones were only sapphires."

Kerr smiled at this measure of fame.

"Quite so," he nodded to her, "but there are several sorts of value about that ring. Its age, for one."

He had the attention of the table, as if they sensed behind his words more even than Judge Buller could have told them.

"And then the superstition about it. It's rather a pretty tale," said Kerr, looking at Flora. "You've seen the ring—a figure of Vishnu bent backward into a circle, with a head of sapphire; two yellow stones for the cheeks and the brain of him of the one blue. Just as a piece of carving it is so fine that Cellini couldn't have equaled it, but no one knows when or where it was made. The first that is known, the Shah Jehan had it in his treasure-house. The story is he stole it, but, however that may be, he gave it as a betrothal gift to his wife—possibly the most beautiful"—his eyebrows signaled to Flora his uncertainty of that fact—"without doubt the best-loved woman in the world. When she died it was buried with her—not in the tomb itself, but in the Taj Mehal; and for a century

or so it lay there and gathered legends about it as thick as dust. It was believed to be a talisman of good fortune—especially in love.

"It had age; it had intrinsic value; it had beauty, and that one other quality no man can resist—it was the only thing of its kind in the world. At all events, it was too much for old Neville Crew, when he saw it there some couple of hundred years ago. When he left India the ring went with him. He never told how he got it, but lucky marriages came with it, and the Crews would not take the House of Lords for it. Their women have worn it ever since."

For a moment the wonder of the tale and the curious spark of excitement it had produced in the teller kept the listeners silent. Clara was the first to return to facts. "Then Bessie—" she prompted eagerly.

Kerr turned his glass in meditative fingers. "She wore it as young Chatworth's wife." He held them all in an increasing tension, as if he drew them toward him.

"The elder Chatworth, Lord Crew, is a bache-

lor, but, of course, the ring reverted to him on Chatworth's death."

"And Lord only knows," the judge broke in, "how it got shipped with Bessie's property. Crew was out of England at the time. He kept the wires hot about it, and they managed to keep the fact of what the ring was quiet—but it got out to-day when Purdie found it was gone. You see he was showing it—and without special permission."

Flora had a bewildered feeling that this judicial summing up of facts wasn't the sort of thing the evening had led up to. She couldn't see, if this was what it amounted to, why Harry had changed his mind about telling them at the dinner table. She could not even understand where this belonged in the march of events in their story, but Clara took it up, clipped it out, and fitted it into its place.

"Then there will be pressure—enormous pressure, brought to bear to recover it?"

"Oh-o-oh!" Buller drew out the syllable with unctuous relish. "They'll rip the town inside

out. They'll do worse. There'll be a string of detectives across the country—yes, and at intervals to China—so tight you couldn't step from Kalamazoo to Oshkosh without running into one. The thing is too big to be covered. The chap who took it will play a lone game; and to do that—Lord knows there aren't many who could —to do that he'd have to be a—a—"

"Farrell Wand?" Flora flung it out as a challenge among these prosaic people; but the effect of it was even sharper than she had expected. She fancied she saw them all start; that Harry squared himself, that Kerr met it as if he swallowed it with almost a facial grimace; that Judge Buller blinked it hard in the face—the most bothered of the lot. He came at it first in words.

"Farrell Wand?" He felt it over, as if, like a doubtful coin, it might have rung false. "Now, what did I know of Farrell Wand?"

"Farrell Wand?" Kerr took it up rapidly. "Why, he was the great Johnnie who went through the Scotland Yard men at Perth in '94, and got off. Don't you remember? He took a

great assortment of things under the most peculiar circumstances—took the Tilton emeralds off Lady Tilton's neck at St. James'."

"Why, Harry, you—" Flora began. "You told us that," was what she had meant to say, but Harry stopped her. Stopped her just with a look, with a nod; but it was as if he had shaken his head at her. His tawny lashes, half drooped over watching eyes, gave him more than ever the look of a great, still cat; a domestic, good-humored cat, but in sight of legitimate prey. Her eyes went back to Kerr with a sense of bewilderment. His voice was still going on, expansively, brilliantly, juggling his subject.

"He knew them all, the big-wigs up in Parliament, the big-wigs on 'Change, the little duchesses in Mayfair, and they all liked him, asked him, dined him, and—great Scott, they paid! Paid in hereditary jewels, or the shock to their decency when the thing came out—but, poor devil, so did he!"

And through it all Buller gloomed unsmiling, with out-thrust underlip.

"No, no," he said slowly, "that's not my connection with Farrell Wand. What happened afterward? What did they do with him?"

Kerr was silent, and Flora thought his face seemed suddenly at its sharpest.

It was Clara who answered with another question. "Didn't he get to the colonies? Didn't he die there?"

Judge Buller caught it with a snap of his fingers. "Got it!" he triumphed, and the two men turned square upon him. "They ran him to earth in Australia. That was the year I was there—'96. I got a snapshot of him at the time."

It was now the whole table that turned on him, and Flora felt, with that unanimous movement, something crucial, the something that she had been waiting for; and yet she could in no way connect it with what had happened, nor understand why Clara, why Harry, why Kerr above all should be so alert. For more than all he looked expectant, poised, and ready for whatever was coming next.

"What sort of a chap?" he mused and fixed

the judge a moment with the same stare that Flora remembered to have first confronted her.

"What sort? Sort of a criminal," the judge smiled. "They all look alike."

"Still," Clara suggested, "such a man could hardly have been ordinary—"

"In the chain-gang—oh, yes," said Buller with conviction.

"Oh! Then the picture wasn't worth anything?"

"Why, no," Buller admitted slowly, "though, come to think of it, it wasn't the chain-gang either. They were taking him aboard the ship. The crowd was so thick I hardly saw him, and—only got one shot at him. But the name was a queer one. It stuck in my mind."

"But then," Clara insisted, "what became of him?"

"Oh, gave them the slip," the judge chuckled. "He always did. Reported to have changed ships in mid-ocean. Hal, is that another bottle?"

Harry stretched his hand for it, but it stayed suspended—and, for an instant, it seemed as if

the whole table waited expectant. Had Buller's camera caught the clear face of Farrell Wand, or only a dim figure? Flora wondered if that was the question Harry wanted to ask. He wanted—and yet he hesitated, as if he did not quite dare touch it. He laughed and filled the glasses. He had dropped his question, and there was no one at the table who seemed ready to put another.

And yet there were questions there, in all the eyes; but some impassable barrier seemed to have come between these eager people, and what, for incalculable reasons, they so much wanted to know. It was not the genial indifference with which Buller had dropped the subject for the approaching bottle. It seemed rather their own timidity that withheld them from touching this subject which at every turn produced upon some one of the eager three some fresh startling effect the others could not understand. They were restless; Clara notably, even under her calm.

Flora knew she was not giving up the quest of Farrell Wand, but only setting it aside with

her unfailing thrift, which saved everything. But why, in this case? And Harry, who had been so merry with the mystery at dinner—why had he suddenly tried to suppress her, to want to ignore the whole business; why had he hesitated over his question, and finally let it fall? And why, above all, was Kerr so brilliantly talking at Ella, in the same way he had begun at Flora herself? Talking at Ella as if he hardly saw her, but like some magician flinging out a brilliant train of pyrotechnics to hypnotize the senses, before he proceeds with his trick. And the way Ella was looking at him—her bewildered alacrity, the way she was struggling with what was being so rapidly shot at her—appeared to Flora the prototype of her own struggle to understand what reality these appearances around her could possibly shadow. Never before had her sense of standing on the outside edge of life been so strong. It seemed as though there were some large, impalpable thing growing in the midst of them, around the edges of which they were tiptoeing, daringly, fearfully, each

one for himself. But though it loomed so large that she felt herself in the very shadow of it, rub her eyes as she would, she couldn't see it.

Often enough in the crowds she moved among she had felt herself lonely and not wondered at it. But now and here, sitting among her close, intimate circle, her friends and her lover, it seemed like a horrible obsession—yet it was true. As clear as if it had been shown her in a revelation she saw herself absolutely alone.

III

ENCOUNTERS ON PARADE

FLORA, before the mirror, gaily stabbing in her long hat-pins, confessed to herself that last night had been queer, as queer as queer could be; but this morning, luckily, was real again. Her fancy last night had—yes, she was afraid it really had—run away with her. And she turned and held the hand-mirror high, to be sure of the line of her tilted hat, gave a touch to the turn of her wide, close belt, a flirt to the frills of her bodice.

The wind was lightly ruffling and puffing out the muslin curtains of the windows, and from the garden below came the long, silvery clash of eucalyptus leaves. She leaned on the high window-ledge to look downward over red roofs, over terraced green, over steep streets running ab-

ruptly to the broken blue of the bay. She tried to fancy how Kerr would look in this morning sun. He seemed to belong only beneath the high artificial lights, in the thicker atmosphere of evening. Would he return again, with renewed potency, with the same singular, almost sinister charm, as a wizard who works his will only by moonlight? When she should see him again, what, she wondered, would be his extraordinary mood? On what new breathless flights might he not take her—or would he see her at all? It was too fantastic. The sunlight thinned him to an impalpable ghost.

It was Clara, standing at the foot of the stairs, who belonged to the morning, so brisk, so fresh, so practical she appeared. She held a book in her hand. The door, open for her immediate departure, showed, beyond the descent of marble steps, the landau glistening black against white pavements. It was unusual for this formal vehicle to put in an appearance so early.

"I am going to drive over to the Purdies'," Clara explained. "I have an errand there."

Flora smiled at the thought of how many persons would be having errands to the Purdies' now. It was refreshing to catch Clara in this weakness. She felt a throb of it herself when she recalled the breathless moment at the supper table last evening. "Oh, that will be a heavenly drive," she said. "Please ask me to go with you. My errand can wait."

"Why, certainly. I should like to have you," said Clara. But if she had returned a flat "no," Flora would not have had a dryer sense of unwelcome. Still, she had gone too far to retreat. After all, this was only Clara's manner, and her buoyant interest in the expedition was stronger than her diffidence.

Mischievous reflections of the doctrine the Englishman had startled her with the night before flickered in her mind, as they drove from the door. Was this part of "the big red game," not being accommodating, nor so very polite? The streets were still wet with early fog, and, turning in at the Presidio gate, the cypresses dripped dankly on their heads, and hung out

cobwebs pearled with dew. She was sure, even under their dripping, that the "damnable dust" was alive.

Down the broad slopes that were swept by the drive all was green to the water's edge. The long line of barracks, the officers' quarters, the great parade-ground, set in the flat land between hills and bay, looked like a child's toy, pretty and little. They heard the note of a bugle, thin and silver clear, and they could see the tiny figures mustering; but in her preoccupation it did not occur to Flora that they were arriving just in time for parade. But when the carriage had crossed the viaduct, and swung them past the acacias, and around the last white curve into the white dust of the parade-ground, Clara turned, as if with a fresh idea.

"Wouldn't you like to stop and watch it?"

"Why, yes," Flora assented. The brilliance of light and color, the precision of movement, the sound of the brasses under the open sky were an intermezzo in harmony with her spirited mood.

The carriage stopped under the scanty shadow of trees that bordered the walk to the officers' quarters. Clara, book in hand, alertly rose.

"I'll just run up to the Purdies' and leave this," she said.

"Then she really did want to be rid of me," Flora mused, as she watched the brisk back moving away; "and how beautifully she has done it!" Her eyes followed Clara's little figure retreating up the neat and narrow board walk, to where it disappeared in overarching depths of eucalyptus trees. Further on, beyond the trees, two figures, smaller than Clara's in their greater distance, were coming down. Flora almost grinned as she recognized the large linen umbrella that Mrs. Purdie invariably carried when abroad in the reservation, and presently the trim and bounding figure of Mrs. Purdie herself, under it. The Purdies were coming down to parade—at least Mrs. Purdie was. But the tall figure beside her —that was not the major. She took up her lorgnon. It was—no it could not be—yet surely

it *was* Harry! Lazy Harry, up and out, and squiring Mrs. Purdie to the review at half-past ten in the morning! "Are we all mad?" Flora thought.

The three little figures, the one going up, the two coming down, touched opposite fringes of the grove—disappeared within it. On which side would they come out together? Flora wondered. They emerged on her side with Harry a little in advance. He came swingingly down the walk, straight toward her, and across the road to the carriage, his hat lifted, his hand out.

"Well, Flora," he said, "this is luck!"

"What in the world has got you out so early?" she rallied him.

"Came out to see Purdie on business, and here you are all ready to drive me back."

"That's your reward."

He brushed his handkerchief over his damp forehead. "Well, there's one coming to me, for I haven't found Purdie."

Her eyes were dancing with mischief. "Harry,

I believe you're out here about the Crew Idol, too!"

He shook his head at her, smiling. "I wouldn't talk too much about that, Flora. It flicks poor Purdie on the raw every time that—" His sentence trailed off into something else, for Mrs. Purdie and Clara had come up.

The book had changed hands, together, evidently, with several explanations, and Mrs. Purdie, with her foot on the carriage step, was ready to make one of these over again.

"The major'll be so sorry. He's gone in town. It's so unusual for him to get off at this hour, but he said he had to catch a man. As Mrs. Britton and I were saying, he's likely to be very busy until this dreadful affair is straightened out. If you can only wait a little longer, Mr. Cressy," she went on, "I am expecting him every moment."

"Oh, it's of no importance," said Harry, but he looked at his watch with a fold between his brows, and then at the car that was coming in.

"Well, at least, you'll have time to see the parade," said Mrs. Purdie. "I always think it's a pretty sight, though most of the women get tired of it."

Clara's face showed that she belonged to the latter class; but Flora, too keenly attuned to sounds and sights not to be swayed by outward circumstances, was content for the time to watch, in the cloud of dust, the wheeling platoons and rhythmic columns.

Yet through all—even when she was not looking at him—she was aware of Harry's restlessness, of his impatience; and as the last company swung barrackward, and the cloud began to settle over the empty field, he snapped his watch-case smartly, and remarked, "Still no major."

"Why, there he is now!" Mrs. Purdie screamed, pointing across the parade-ground.

Flora looked. Half-way down on the adjoining side of the parallelogram, back toward her, the redoubtable Kerr was standing. She recognized him on the instant, as if he were the most familiar figure in her life. Yet she was more

surprised to see him here than she had been to see Harry. She felt inclined to rub her eyes. It took a moment for her to realize that his companion was indeed Major Purdie.

The major had recognized his wife's signaling umbrella. Now he turned toward it, but Kerr, with a quick motion of hand toward hat, turned in the opposite direction. In her mind Flora was with the major who ran after him. The two men stood for a little, expostulating. Then both walked toward the landau and the linen umbrella.

The carriage group waited, watching with flagging conversation, which finally fell into silence. But the two approaching strolled easily and talked. Even in cold daylight Kerr still gave Flora the impression that the open was not big enough to hold him, but she saw a difference in his mood, a graver eye, a colder mouth, and when he finally greeted them, a manner that was brusk. It showed uncivil beside the major's urbanity.

The major was glad, very glad, to see them

all. He was evidently also a little flurried. He seemed to know that they had all met Kerr before. Had it been at the moment of his attempted departure that Kerr had told him, Flora wondered? And had he given them as his excuse for going away? It hurt her; though why should she be hurt because a stranger had not wanted to cross the parade-ground to shake hands with her? He was less interested in her than he was in Harry, at whom he had looked keenly.

But Harry's nervousness had left him, now that Purdie was within his reach. He returned the glance indifferently. He stood close to the major—his hand on his shoulder. The major, with his bland blue eyes twinkling from Clara to Flora, seemed the only man ready to devote himself to the service of the ladies.

"And what's the news from the front?" said Clara gaily. Kerr gave her a rapid glance; but the major blinked as if the allusion had got by him.

"I mean the mystery—the Chatworth ring,"

she explained. However lightly and sweetly Clara said it, it was a little brazen to fling such a question at poor Purdie, whose responsibility the ring had been.

He received it amicably enough, but conclusively. "No news whatever, my dear Mrs. Britton."

She smiled. "We're all rather interested in the mystery. Flora has made a dozen romances about it."

"Oh, yes, yes," said the major indulgently. "It will do for young ladies to make romances about. It'll be a two days' wonder, and then you'll suddenly find out it's something very tame indeed."

"Why, have they fixed the suspicion?" said Clara.

There was a restless movement from Kerr.

"No, no, nothing of that sort," said the major quickly.

Harry passed his hand through his arm. "May I see you for five minutes, Major?"

The excellent major looked harassed.

"Suppose we all step up to the house," he suggested. "Why, you're not going, man?" he objected, for Kerr had fallen back a step, and, with lifted hat and balanced cane, was signaling his farewells.

"Do let us go up to the house," said Clara. "And Mrs. Purdie, won't you drive up with me? Flora wants to walk."

Flora stood up. She had a confused impression that she had expressed no such desire, and that there was room for three in the landau; but the mental shove that Clara had administered gave her an impetus that carried her out of the carriage before she realized what she was about. Some one had offered a hand to help her, and when she was on the ground she saw it was Kerr, who had come back and was standing beside her. He was smiling quizzically.

"I feel rather like walking, myself," he said. "Do you want a companion?"

She turned to him with gratitude. "I should be glad of one," she said quickly. She was

touched. She had not thought he could be so gentle.

Harry was already moving off up the board walk with the major. The carriage was turning. Kerr looked at the backs of the two women being driven away, and then at Flora. "Very good," he said, raising her parasol; "you are the deposed heir, and I am your faithful servant."

"But indeed I do want to walk," she protested, a little shy at the way he read her case.

"But you didn't think of it until she gave you the suggestion, eh?" he quizzed.

"She probably had something to say to Mrs. Purdie that—"

"My dear child," he caught her up earnestly, "don't think I'm criticizing your friend's motive. I am only saying I saw something done that was not pretty, though really, if you will forgive me—it was very funny."

Flora smiled ruefully. "It must have been —absurd. I am afraid I often am. But what else could I have done?"

He seemed to ponder a moment. "I fancy *you* couldn't have done anything different. That's why I came back for you," he volunteered gaily.

The casual words seemed in her ears fraught with deeper meaning. Her cheeks were hot behind her thin veil. They were strolling slowly up the board walk, and for a moment she could not look at him. She could only listen to the flutter of the fringes of the parasol carried above her head. She felt herself small and stupid. She could not understand what he could see in her to come back to. Then she gave a side glance at him. She saw an unsmiling profile. The lines in his face were indeed extraordinary, but none was hard. She liked that wonderful mobility that had survived the batterings of experience.

As if he were conscious of her eyes, he looked down and smiled; but vaguely. He did not speak; and she was aware that it was at her appearance he had smiled, as if that only reached him through his preoccupation and pleased him.

And since he seemed content with this vague looking, she was content to move beside him silent, a mere image of youth and—since he liked it—of prettiness, with a fleeting color and a gust of little curls blowing out under a fluttering veil.

But what was he thinking about so seriously between those smiling glances? Not her problem, she was sure.

Yet he had stayed for her when he had not meant to stay. He had been anxious to get away since he had first sighted them. Surely he must like her more than he disliked some other member of her party. Or had he simply reached forth out of his kindness to rescue her, as he might have rescued a blind kitten that he pitied? "No," he had said, "*you* could not have done anything different."

They had almost reached the major's gate, and it was now or never to find out what he thought of her. She looked up at him suddenly, with inquiring eyes.

"Do you think I am weak?" she demanded.

The lines of his face broke up into laughter. "No," he said, "I think you are misplaced."

She knitted her brows in perplexity, but his hand was on the white picket gate, and she had to walk through it ahead of him as he set it open for her.

Of their party only the two women were in sight waiting on the diminutive veranda. Clara had a mild domestic appearance, rocking there behind the potted geraniums. All the windows were open into the little shell of a house. Trunks still stood in the hall, though the Purdies had been quartered at the Presidio for nine months. From the rear of the house came the sound of bowl and chopper, where the Chinese cook was preparing luncheon, and the major's man appeared, walking around the garden to the veranda, with a cluster of mint juleps on a copper tray.

In this easy atmosphere, how was it that the thread of restraint ran so sharply defined? Clara and Mrs. Purdie were matching crewels; and, sitting on the top step Flora instructed

Kerr as to the composition of the tropical glacier they were drinking. Ten girls had probably so instructed him before, but it would do to fill up the gap. It was so, Flora thought, they were all feeling. Even the carriage, driving slowly round and round the rectangle of officers' row, added its note of restlessness.

Like a stone plumped into a pool the major and Harry reëntered this stagnation. They were brisk and buoyant. Harry, especially, had the air of a man who sees stimulating business before him. Immediately all talked at once.

"Now that we've got you here, you must all stay to luncheon," Mrs. Purdie determined.

It looked as if they were about to accept her invitation unanimously, but Harry demurred. He had to be at Montgomery Street and Jackson by one o'clock. "I hoped," he added, glancing at Flora, "that some one was to drive me—part of the way, at least."

Flora, with an unruly sense of disappointment, yet opened her lips for the courteous answer. But Clara was quicker. She rose.

"Yes," she said, "I'll drive you back with pleasure."

Harry's glimmer of annoyance was comic.

"I have to be at the house for luncheon," Clara explained to her hostess as she buttoned her glove, "but there is no reason why Flora shouldn't stay."

"Oh, I should love to," Flora murmured, not knowing whether she was more embarrassed or pleased at this high-handed dispensation which placed her where she wanted to be.

But the way Clara had leaped at her opportunity! Flora looked curiously at Harry.

He seemed uneasy at being pounced upon, but that might be merely because he was balked of a tête-à-tête with herself. For while Clara went on to the gate with their hostess he lingered a moment with Flora.

"May I see you to-night?"

"All you have to do is to come."

She gave him an oblique, upward glance, and had a pleasant sense of power in seeing his face relax and smile. She had a dance for that even-

ing; but she thrust it aside without regret. For suppose Harry should have something to tell her about the Chatworth ring? She wondered if Clara would get it out of him first on the way home.

The four left on the veranda watched the two driving away with a sudden clearing of the social atmosphere. In vain Flora told herself it was only the relief she always felt in getting free of Clara. For in the return of the major's elderly blandishments, in Kerr's kindlier mood, as well as in her own lightened spirits, she had the proofs that, with them all, some tension had relaxed. It seemed to her as if those two, departing, were bearing away between them the very mystery of the Crew Idol.

IV

FLOWERS BY THE WAY

FLORA liked this funny little dining-room with walls as frail as box-boards, low-ceiled and flooded with sun. It recalled surroundings she had known later than the mining camp, but long before the great red house. It seemed to her that she fitted here better than the Purdies. She looked across at Kerr, sitting opposite, to see if perhaps he fitted too. But he was foreign, decidedly. He kept about him still the hint of delicate masquerade that she had noticed the night before. Out of doors, alone with her, he had lost it. For a moment he had been absolutely off his guard. And even now he was more off his guard than he had been last night. She was surprised to see him so un-

studied, so uncritical, so humorously anecdotal. If she and the major, between them, had dragged him into this against his will he did not show it. She rose from the table with the feeling that in an hour all three of them had become quite old friends of his, though without knowing anything further about him.

"We must do this again," Mrs. Purdie said, as they parted from her in the garden.

"Surely we will," Kerr answered her.

But Flora had the feeling that they never, never would. For him it had been a chance touching on a strange shore.

But at least they were going away together. They would walk together as far as the little car, whose terminal was the edge of the parade-ground. But just outside of the gate he stopped.

"Do you especially like board walks?" he asked.

It was an instant before she took his meaning. Then she laughed. "No. I like green paths."

He waved with his cane. "There is a path

yonder, that goes over a bridge, and beyond that a hill."

"And at the top of that another car," Flora reminded him.

"Ah well," he said, "there are flowers on the way, at least." He looked at her whimsically. "There are three purple irises under the bridge. I noticed them as I came down."

She was pleased that he had noticed that for himself—pleased, too, that he had suggested the longer way.

The narrow path that they had chosen branched out upon the main path, broad and yellow, which dipped downward into the hollow. From there came the murmur of water. Green showed through the white grass of last summer. The odor of wet evergreens was pungent in their nostrils. They looked at the delicate fringed acacias, at the circle of hills showing above the low tree-tops, at the cloudless sky; but always their eyes returned to each other's faces, as if they found these the pleasantest points of the landscape. Sauntering be-

tween plantations of young eucalyptus, they came to the arched stone bridge. They leaned on the parapet, looking down at the marshy stream beneath and at the three irises Kerr had remarked, knee-deep in swamp ground.

"Now that I see them I suppose I want them," Flora remarked.

"Of course," he assented. "Then hold all these."

He put into her hands the loose bunch of syringa and rose plucked for her in the Purdies' garden, laid his hat and gloves on the parapet; then, with an eye for the better bank, walked to the end of the bridge.

She watched him descending the steep bank and issuing into the broad shallow basin of the stream's way. The sun was still high enough to fill the hollows with warm light and mellow the doubles of trees and grass in the stream. In this landscape of green and pale gold he looked black and tall and angular. The wind blew longish locks of hair across his forehead, and she had a moment's pleased and timorous

reflection that he looked like Satan coming into the Garden.

He advanced from tussock to tussock. He came to the brink of the marsh. The lilies wavered what seemed but a hand's-breadth from him. But he stooped, he reached— Oh, could anything so foolish happen as that he could not get them! Or, more foolish still, plunge in to the knees! He straightened from his fruitless effort, drew back, but before she could think what he was about he had leaned forward again, flashed out his cane, and with three quick, cutting slashes the lilies were mown. It was deftly, delicately, astonishingly done, but it gave her a singular shock, as if she had seen a hawk strike its prey. He drew them cleverly toward him in the crook of his cane, took them up daintily in his fingers, and returned to her across the shallow valley. She waited him with mixed emotions.

"Oh, how could you!" she murmured, as he put them into her hand.

He looked at her in amused astonishment. "Why, aren't they right?"

They were as clean clipped off and as perfect as if the daintiest hand had plucked them.

"Oh, yes," she admitted, "they're lovely, but I don't like the way you got them."

"I took the means I had," he objected.

"I don't think I like it."

His whole face was sparkling with interest and amusement. "Is that so? Why not?"

"You're too—too"—she cast about for the word—"too terribly resourceful!"

"I see," he said. If she had feared he would laugh, it showed how little she had gauged the limits of his laughter. He only looked at her rather more intently than he had before.

"But, my good child, resourcefulness is a very natural instinct. I am afraid you read more into it than is there. You wanted the flowers, I had a stick, and in my youth I was taught to strike clean and straight. I am really a very simple fellow."

Looking him in the eyes, which were of a clear, candid gray, she was ready to believe it. It seemed as if he had let her look for a moment through his manner, his ironies, his armor of indifference, to the frank foundations of his nature.

"But, you see, the trouble is you don't in the least look it," she argued.

"So you think because I have a long face and wild hair that I am a sinister person? My dear Miss Gilsey, the most desperate character I ever knew was five feet high and wore mutton-chop whiskers. It is an uncertain business judging men by their appearance."

She could not help smiling. "But most people do."

"I don't class you with most people."

She gave him a quick look. "You *did* the first night."

"Possibly—but less and less ever since. You have me now in the state of mind where I don't know what you'll be at next."

This was fortunate, she thought, since she

had not the least idea herself, beyond a teasing desire to find out more about him. He had shown her many fleeting phases which, put together, seemed contradictory. She could not connect this man, so mild and amusing, strolling beside her, with the alert, whetted, combative person of the night before, or even with the aloof and reticent figure on the parade-ground. His very attitude toward herself had changed from the amused scrutiny of the first night into something more indulgent, more sympathetic. There was only one attitude on his part that had remained the same—one attitude toward one person—and her mind hovered over this. On each occasion it had stirred her curiosity and, though she had not admitted it, made her uneasy. Why not probe him on the subject, now that she had him completely to herself? But as soon as silence fell between them she saw that wave of preoccupation which had submerged him during their walk from the parade-ground to the Purdies' rising over him again and floating him away from her. He no longer even

looked at her. His eyes were on the ground, and it was not until they had crossed the open expanse of the shallow valley and were climbing toward the avenue of cypress that she found courage to put her question.

"Have you and Mr. Cressy met before?"

He raised his head with a jerk and looked at her a moment in astonishment.

"Do you mind if I answer your question American fashion by asking another?" he said presently. "What put it into your head that we may have met before?"

"The way you looked at each other at the club, and again this morning."

Kerr shook his head. "You are an observant young person! The fact is, I've never met him —of that I'm certain, but I believe I've seen him before, and for the life of me, I can't think where. At the moment you spoke I was trying to remember."

"Was it in this country?" Flora prompted, hopeful of fishing something definite out of this vagueness.

"No, it was years ago. It must have been in England." He looked at her inquiringly, as if he expected her to help him.

"Oh, Harry's been in England," she said quickly; and then, with a flashing thought, came to her the one scene Harry had mentioned in his English experience. Was it at a ball? The question came to her lips, but she checked it there. She remembered how Harry had stopped her the night before with a nod, with a look, from mentioning that very thing. Still she hesitated—for the temptation was strong. But no; it was only loyal to Harry to speak to him first.

"So you're not going to tell me?" Kerr remarked, and she came back to a sudden consciousness of how her face must have reflected her thought.

"No—not this time!" she said, smiling, though somewhat flushed.

He knitted his brows at her. They had reached the arched gate, and the car that would carry her home was approaching.

"Ah, then, I am afraid it will be never," he said.

Was it possible this was their last meeting? Did he mean he was going away? The questions formed in her mind, but there was no time for words. He had stopped the car with a flick of his agile cane, and handed her in as if he had handed her into a carriage; and not a word as to whether they would see each other again, though she hoped and hesitated to the last moment.

Her hand was in his for the fraction of a minute. Then the car was widening the distance between them, and she was no longer looking into his face, which had seemed at their last moment both merry and wistful, but back at his diminishing figure, showing black against the pale Presidio hills.

V

ON GUARD

HE had so disturbed her, his presence had so obliterated other presences and annihilated time, that it took an encounter with Clara to remind her of her arrangement for the evening. The dance? No, she had given that up. She had promised Harry to be at home. Clara wanted to know rather austerely what she intended to do about the dinner. This was dreadful! Flora had forgotten it completely. Nothing to be done but go, and leave a message for Harry—apology, and assurance that she would be home early. She wondered if she were losing her memory.

She appeared to be changing altogether, for the dinner—a merry one—bored her. What she wanted was to get away from it as soon as pos-

sible for that interesting evening. When she had made the appointment with Harry she had been excited by the thought that he might tell her whether he had learned anything from the major that morning in the matter of the ring. But now she was more engrossed with the idea of asking about Kerr—whether Harry had really met him—if so, where; and, finally, why did not Harry want her to mention that Embassy ball?

Primed with these questions, she left immediately after coffee, arriving at her own red stone portal at ten. But coming in, all a-flutter with the idea of having kept him waiting when she had so much to ask, she found her note as she had left it. She questioned Shima. There had been no message from Mr. Cressy. Her first annoyance was lost in wonder. What could be the matter? If this was neglect on Harry's part—well, it would be the first time. But she did not believe it was neglect. He had been too eager that morning.

She went into the drawing-room—a dull-pink, stupendous chamber—knelt a moment before the

flashing wood fire, then rose, and crossing to the window, looked anxiously out. She had a flight of fancy toward accidents, but in that case she would certainly have heard. The French clock on the mantel rang half-past ten. The sound had hardly died in the great spaces before she heard the fine snarl of the electric bell.

She restrained an impulse to dash into the hall, and stood impatient in the middle of the room.

He came in hastily, his lips all ready with words which hesitated at sight of her.

"Why, you're going out!" he said.

She had forgotten the cloak that still hung from her shoulders.

"No, I've just come in, and all my fine apologies for being out are wasted. How long do you think Clara'll let you stop at this hour?"

"Clara isn't here," he said.

"Well, then your time is all the shorter." She was nettled that he should be oblivious of his lapse. Their relation had never been sentimental, but he had always been punctilious.

"I'm sorry," he said, arriving at last at his apology. "I couldn't help being late. I've had a day of it." He drew his hands across his forehead, and she noticed that he was in his morning clothes and looked as rumpled and flurried as a man just from the office.

She relented. "Poor dear! You do look tired! Don't take that chair. It's more Louis Quinze than comfortable. Come into the library. And remember," she added, when Shima had set the decanter and glasses beside him, "you are to stay just twenty minutes."

He took a sip of his drink and looked at her over the top of his glass. "I may have to stay longer if you want to hear about it."

"Oh, Harry, you really know something? All the evening I've heard nothing but the wildest rumors. Some say Major Purdie couldn't speak because some one 'way up knows more than she should about it. And somebody else said it wasn't the real ring at all that was taken, only a paste copy, and that is why they're not doing more about getting it back."

"Not doing more about getting it back?" Harry laughed. "Is that the idea that generally prevails? Why, Flora—" He stopped, waited a moment while she leaned forward expectant. "Flora," he began again, "are you mum?"

She nodded, breathless.

"Not a word to Clara?"

"Oh, of course not."

"Well—" He twisted around in his chair the better to face her. "To-morrow there will be published a reward of twenty thousand dollars for the return of the Crew Idol, and no questions asked."

"Oh!" she said. And again, "Oh, is that all!" She was disappointed. "I don't see why you and the major should have been so mysterious about that."

"You don't, eh? Suppose you had taken the ring—wouldn't it make a difference to you if you knew twenty-four hours ahead that a reward of twenty thousand dollars would be published? Wouldn't you expect every man's hand

to be against you at that price? If you had a pal, wouldn't you be afraid he'd sell you up? Wouldn't you be glad of twenty-four hours' start to keep him from turning state's evidence? Well—it's just so that he shan't have the start that the authorities are keeping so almighty dark about the reward. They want to spring it on him."

Flora leaned forward with knitted brows. "Yes, I can see that, but still, just among ourselves, this morning—"

Harry smiled. "You've lost sight of the fact that it is just among ourselves the thing has happened."

"Oh, oh! Now you're ridiculous!"

"I might be, if the thing had happened anywhere but in this town; but think a moment. How much do we know of the people we meet, where they were, and who they were, before they came here? There's a case in point. It was not quite 'among ourselves' this morning."

"Harry, how horrid of you!" She was on the point of declaring that she knew Kerr very

well indeed; but she remembered this might not be the thing to say to Harry.

"My dear girl, I'm not saying anything against him. I only remarked that we did not know him."

"Don't *you*, Harry?"

He gave her a quick look. "Why, what put that into your head?"

"I—I don't know. I thought you looked at him very hard last night in the picture gallery. And afterward, at supper, don't you remember, you did not want me to mention your connection with something or other he was talking about?"

"Something or other he was talking about?" Harry inquired with a frowning smile.

"I think it was about that Embassy ball—"

"*I* didn't want you to mention the Embassy ball?" he repeated, and now he was only smiling. "My dear child, surely you are dreaming."

She looked at him with the bewildered feeling that he was flatly contradicting himself.

And yet she could remember he had not shaken his head at her. He had only nodded. Could it be that her cherished imagination had played her a trick at last? But the next moment it occurred to her that somehow she had been led away from her first question.

"Then *have* you seen him, Harry?" she insisted.

"No!" He jerked it out so sharply that it startled her, but she stuck to her subject.

"And you wouldn't have minded my telling him you had been at that ball?"

There was a pause while Harry looked at the fire. Then— "Look here," he burst out, "did he ask you about it?"

"Oh, no," she protested. "I only just happened to wonder."

He stared at her as if he would have liked to shake her. But then he rose from his frowning attitude before the fire, came over to her, sat on the arm of her chair, and, with the tip of one finger under her chin, lifted her face; but she did not lift her eyes. She heard only

his voice, very low, with a caressing note that she hardly knew as Harry's.

"It isn't that I care *what* you say to him. The fact is, Flora, I suppose I was a little jealous, but I naturally don't like the suggestion that you would discuss me with a stranger."

She knew herself properly reproved, and she reproached herself, not for what she had actually said to Kerr of Harry—that had been trivial enough—but for that wayward impulse she had to confide in this clear-eyed, whimsical stranger, as it had never occurred to her to confide in Harry.

She raised her eyes. "Certainly I shall not discuss you with him."

"Is that a promise?"

"Harry, how you do dislike him!"

"Well, suppose I do?" he shrugged.

"You've used up twice your twenty minutes," she said, "and Clara will be scandalized."

He stopped the caressing movement of his hand on her hair. "Are you afraid of Clara?" he asked.

"Mercy, yes!" She was half in earnest and half laughing. "But then I'm afraid of every one."

He put his arm affectionately around her. "But not of me?"

"Oh," she told him, "you're a great big purring pussy-cat, and I am your poor little mouse."

He thought this reply immensely witty, and Flora thought what a great boy he was, after all.

"Now, really, you must go home," she urged, trying to rise.

"But look here," he protested, still on the arm of her chair, "there's another thing I want to ask you about." And by the tip of one finger he lifted her left hand shining with rings. "You will have to have another one of these, you know. It's been on my mind for a week. Is there any sort you haven't already?"

She held up her hand to the light and fluttered its glitter.

"Any one that you gave me would be dif-

ferent from the others, wouldn't it?" she asked prettily.

"Oh, that's very nice of you, Flora, but I want to find you something new. When shall we look for it? To-morrow, in the morning?"

"Yes, I should love it," she answered, but with no particular enthusiasm, for the idea of shopping with Harry, and shopping at Shrove's, did not present a wide field of possibility. "But I have a luncheon to-morrow," she added, "so we must make it as early as ten."

"Oh, you two!"

At Clara's mildly reproving voice so close beside them both started like conspirators. They had not heard her come in, yet there she was, just inside the doorway, still wrapped in her cloak. But there was none of the impetus of arrested motion in her attitude. She stood at repose as if she might have waited not to interrupt them.

"Don't scold Flora," said Harry, rising. "It's my fault. She sent me away half an hour ago. But it is so comfortable here!"

Flora couldn't tell whether he was simply natural, or whether he was giving this domestic color to their interview on purpose. She rather thought it was the latter.

"To-morrow at ten, then!" he said cheerfully to Flora. The stiff curtains rustled behind him and the two women were left together.

"What an important appointment," said Clara lightly, "to bring a man at this hour to make it."

"Oh, it is, awfully!" Flora answered in the same key. "To choose my engagement ring."

Clara's delicate brows flew upward, and though Clara herself made no comment, the quick facial movement said, "I don't believe it."

VI

BLACK MAGIC

THE memory of Clara's incredulous glance remained with her as something curious, and she was not unprepared to be challenged when, the next morning, she hurried down the hall, drawing on her gloves. Clara's door did open, but the lady herself, yawning lightly on the threshold, had this time no questions for her. "Remember the luncheon," she advised, "and by the way, Ella wants us to sit in their box to-night. Don't forget to tell Harry."

Flora threw back a gay "All right," but she was in danger of forgetting even the object of their errand, once she and Harry were out in the bright glare of the street. The wind, keen and resinous from the wet Presidio woods, blew

at their back down the short block of pavement, and buffeted them broadside, as they waited on the corner for the slow-crawling little car. In spite of the blustering air Flora insisted on the side seat of the "dummy," and, catching her hat with one hand, pressing down her fluttering skirts with the other, she laughed, now sidelong at Harry, now out at the dancing face of the bay.

Each succeeding cross-street gave up a flash of blue water. The short blocks slid by, first stone fronts and fresh lawns, stucco and tiles; then here and there corner lots, the great gray, towered, wooden mansions the stock-brokers of the "seventies" built, and below them, like a contingent of shabby-genteel relations, the narrow gray wooden faces of what was "smart" in the "sixties". It was a continuous progress backward toward the old, the original town. There was no stately nucleus. This town was a succession of widening ripples of progress, each newer, more polished than the last, but not different in quality from the old center that still

teemed—a region of frail wooden rookeries full of foreign contending interests, haunted with the adventures of its feverish past. It had built itself on the hopes of a moment, and what spread from it still was the spell of the new, the changing, and the reckless. It drew still from the ends of the earth. The broad road in over the mountains, the broad road out over the ocean made it where it stood, touching all trades, a road-house of the world.

Some dim perception of this touched Flora as the houses, gliding past, grew older, grayer, with steeper gardens, narrower streets, here and there even trees, lone, sentinel, at the edge of cobbled gutters. From the crest of the last hill they had looked a mile down the long gray throat of the street to where the ferry building lay stretched out with its one tall tower pricked up among the masts of shipping. Halfway between their momentary perch and the ferry slips the street suddenly thickened, darkened, swarmed, flying a yellow pennon high above blackened roofs. And now, as they slip-

ped down the long decline into the foreign quarter the pungent oriental breath of Chinatown was blown up to them. She breathed it in readily. It was pleasant because it was strange, outlandish, suggesting a wide web of life beyond her own knowledge. She wondered what Harry was thinking of it, as he sat with his passive profile turned from her to the heathen street ahead. She guessed, by the curl of his nostril, that it was only present to him as an unpleasant odor to be got through as quickly as possible; but she was wrong. He had another thought. This time, oddly enough, a thought for her.

He gave it to her presently, abrupt, matter-of-fact, material. "That Chinese goldsmith down there has good stuff now and then. How'd you like to look in there before we go on to what-you-call-'em's,—the regular place?"

"You mean for a ring?" She was doubtful only of his being in earnest.

"You have so many of the Shrove kind," he explained. "I thought you might like it, Flora; you're so romantic!" he laughed.

"Like it!" she cried, too touched at his thought for her to resent the imputation. "I should love it! But I didn't know they had such things."

"Now and then—though it is a rare chance."

"But that will be just the fun of it," she hastened, half afraid lest Harry should change his mind, "to see if we can possibly find one that will be different from all these others."

She kept this little feeling of exploration close about her, as they left the car, a block above the green trees of the plaza, and entered one of the narrow streets that was not even a cross-street, but an alley, running to a bag's end, with balconies, green railings and narcissi taking the sun.

A slant-eyed baby in a mauve blouse stared after them; and a white face so poisoned in its badness that it gave Flora a start, peered at them from across the street. It made her shrink a little behind Harry's broad shoulder and take hold of his arm. The mere touch of that arm was security. His big presence, moving agilely

beside her, seemed to fill the street with its strength, as if, by merely flinging out his arms, Samson-like, he could burst the dark walls asunder.

In the middle of the block, sunk a little back from the fronts of the others, the goldsmith's shop showed a single, filmed window; and the pale glow through it proclaimed that the worker in metals preferred another light to the sun's. The threshold was worn to a hollow that surprised the foot; and the interior into which it led them gloomed so suddenly around them after the broad sunlight, that it was a moment before they made out the little man behind the counter, sitting hunched up on a high stool.

"Hullo, Joe," said Harry, in the same voice that hailed his friends on the street-corners; but the goldsmith only nodded like a nodding mandarin, as if, without looking up, he took them in and sensed their errand. He wore a round, blue Chinese cap drawn over his crown; a pair of strange goggles like a mask over his eyes, and his little body seemed to poise as

lightly on his high stool as a wisp, as if there were no more flesh in it than in his long, dry fingers that so marvelously manipulated the metal. Save for that glitter of gold on his glass plate, and the grin of a lighted brazier, all was dark, discolored and cluttered.

And the way Harry bloomed upon this background of dubious antiquity! He leaned on the little counter, which creaked under his weight, in his big, fresh coat, with his clear, fresh face bent above the shallow tray of trinkets—doubtful jades, dim-eyed rings, dull clasps and coins —his large, fastidious finger poked among. He was the one vital thing in the shop.

Over everything else was spread a dimness of age like dust. It enveloped the little man behind the counter, not with the frailness that belongs to human age, but with that weathered, polished hardness which time brings to antiques of wood and metal. Indeed, he appeared so like a carved idol in a curio shop that Flora was a little startled to find that he was looking at her. Chinamen had always seemed to her blank automatons;

but this one looked keenly, pointedly, as if he personally took note. She told herself whimsically that perhaps it was his extraordinary glasses that gave point to that expression; and presently when he took them off she was surprised to see it seemed verily true. His little physiognomy had no more expression than a withered nut. But there was something about it more disturbing than its vanishing intelligence, something unexpected, and out of harmony with the rest of him, yet so illusive that, flit over him as her eye would, she failed to find it.

"Harry," she murmured to Cressy, who was still stirring the contents of the box with a disdainful forefinger, "this little man gives me the shivers."

"Old Joe?" Harry smiled indulgently. "He's a queer customer. Been quite a figurehead in Chinatown for twenty years. Say, Joe, heap bad!" and with the back of his hand he flicked the tray away from him.

The little man undoubled his knees and de-

scended the stool. He stood breast-high behind the counter. He dropped a lack-luster eye to the box. "Velly nice," he murmured with vague, falling inflection.

"Oh, rotten!" Harry laughed at him.

"You no like?"

"No. No like. You got something else—something nice?"

"No." It was like a door closed in the face of their hope—that falling inflection, that blank of vacuity that settled over his face, and his whole drooping figure. He seemed to be only mutely awaiting their immediate departure to climb back again on his high stool. But Harry still leaned on the counter and grinned ingratiatingly. "Oh, Joe, you good flen'. You got something pretty—maybe?"

The curtain of vacuity parted just a crack —let through a gleam of intense intelligence. "Maybe." The goldsmith chuckled deeply, as if Harry had unwittingly perpetrated some joke—some particularly clever conjurer's trick. He sidled out behind the counter, past the grin-

ning brazier, and shuffled into the back of the shop where he opened a door.

Flora had expected a cupboard, but the vista it gave upon was a long, black, incredibly narrow passage, that stretched away into gloom with all the suggestion of distance of a road going over a horizon. Down this the goldsmith went, with his straw slippers clapping on his heels, until his small figure merged in the gloom and presently disappeared altogether, and only the faint flipper-flap of his slippers came back growing more and more distant to them, and finally dying into silence. In the stillness that followed while they waited they could hear each other breathe. The little shop with the water-stained walls and the ancient odor—ancient as the empire of China—inclosed them like a spell cast around them by a vanishing enchanter to hold them there mute until his returning. They did not look at each other, but rather at the glowing brazier, at the gold on the glass plates, at the forms of people passing in the street, moving palely across the dim window pane, as

distant to Flora's eye as though they moved in another world. Then came the flipper-flap of the goldsmith's slippers returning. The sound snapped their tension, and Harry laughed.

"Lord knows how far he went to get it!"

"Across the street?" Flora wondered.

"Or under it. And it won't be worth two bits when it gets here." He peered at the little man coming toward them down the passage, flapping and shuffling, and carrying, held before him in both hands, a square, deep little box.

It was a worn, nondescript box that he set down before them, but the jealous way he had carried it had suggested treasure, and Flora leaned eagerly forward as he raised the cover, half expecting the blaze of a jewel-case. She saw at first only dull shanks of metal tumbled one upon the other. But, after a moment's peering, between them she caught gleams of veritable light. Her fingers went in to retrieve a hoop of heavy silver, in the midst of which was sunk a flawed topaz. She admired a moment the play of light over the imperfection.

"But this isn't Chinese," she objected, turning her surprise on Harry.

"Lots of 'em aren't. These men glean everywhere. That's pretty." He held up a little circle of discolored but lusterful pearls—let it fall again, since it was worth only a glance. He leaned on the counter, indifferent to urge where value seemed so slight. He seemed amused at Flora's enthusiasm for clouded opals.

"They look well enough among this junk," he said, "but compare them with your own rings and you'll see the difference."

She heard him dreamily. She was wishing, as she turned over the tumble of damaged jewels, that things so pretty might have been perfect. To find a perfect thing in this place would be too extraordinary to hope for. Yet, taking up the next, and the next, she found herself wishing it might be this one—this cracked intaglio. No? Then this blue one—say. The setting spoke nothing for it. It was a plain, thin, round hoop of palpable brass, and the battered thing seemed almost too feeble to hold the soli-

tary stone. But the stone! She looked it full in the eye, the big, blazing, blue eye of it. What was the matter with this one? A flaw? She held it to the light.

She felt Harry move behind her. She knew he couldn't but be looking at it. For how, by all that was marvelous, had she for a moment doubted it? Down to its very heart, which was near to black, it was clear fire, and outward toward the facets struck flaming hyacinth hues with zigzag white cross-lights that dazzled and mesmerized. Just the look of it—the marvelous deep well of its light—declared its truth.

"Harry," she breathed, without taking her gaze from the thing in her hand, "do look at this!"

She felt him lean closer. Then with an abrupt "Let's see it," he took it from her—held it to the light, laid it on his palm, looking sharply across the counter at the shopkeeper, then back at the ring with a long scrutiny. His face, too, had a flush of excitement.

"Is it—good?" Flora faltered.

"A sapphire," he said, and taking her third finger by the tip, he slid on the thin circle of metal.

She breathed high, looking down at the stone with eyes absorbed in the blue fire. There was none of the cupidity of women for jewels in her look. It was the intrinsic beauty of this drop of dark liquid light that had captured her. It had mystery, and her imagination woke to it —the wistful mystery of perfect beauty. And perfect beauty in such a place! It was too beautiful. The feeling it brought her was too sharp for pure pleasure. It was dimly like fear. Yet instinctively she shut her hand about the ring. She murmured out her wonder.

"How in the world did such a thing come here?"

"Oh, not so strange," Harry answered. He leaned on his elbow upon the counter, his head bent close to hers above the single, glittering point that drew the four eyes to one focus. "Sailors now and then pick up a thing of whose value they have no idea—get hard up, and

pawn it—still without any idea. These chaps" —and his bold hand indicated the shopkeeper —"take in anything—that is, anything worth their while; and wait, and wait, and wait until they see just the moment—and turn it to account."

It might be because Harry's eyes were so taken with the jewel that his tongue ran recklessly. He had spoken low, but Flora sent an anxious glance to be sure the shopkeeper hadn't overheard. She had meant only to glance, but she found herself staring into eyes that stared back from the other side of the counter. That wide, unwinking scrutiny filled her whole vision. For an instant she saw nothing but the dance of scintillant pupils. Then, with a little gasp she clutched at her companion's arm.

"Oh, Harry!"

His glance came quickly round to her. "Why, what's the matter?"

She murmured, "That Chinaman has blue eyes."

He looked at her with good-natured wonder.

"Why, Flora, haven't you blue on the brain? I believe he has, though," he added, as he peered across the counter at the shopkeeper, whose gaze now fluttered under narrowed lids; "but why in the world should blue eyes scare you?" His look returned indulgently to Flora's face.

She could not explain her reason of fear to him. She could not explain it to herself more than that the eyes had seemed to know. What? She could not tell; but they had had a deadly intelligence. She only whispered back, "But he is awful!"

"Oh, I guess not," Harry grinned, and turned his back to the counter, "only part white. Makes him a little sharper at a bargain."

But, in spite of his off-handedness, Flora saw he was alert, touched with excitement. Once or twice he looked from the shopkeeper to the sapphire.

"Do you like it, Flora?" he said. "Do you

want it?" He spoke eagerly against her reluctance.

"It is the most beautiful thing I ever saw, but—" She could not put it to him why she shrank from it. That feeling which had touched her at the first had a little expanded, the sense of the sapphire's sinister charm. She faltered out as much as she could explain. "It's too much for me."

His shoulders shook with appreciation of this. "Oh, I guess not! If you keep that up I shall be thinking you mean it is too much for me."

It hadn't been in the least what she meant, but now that he had suggested it to her—"Well, I shouldn't like it to be," she blushed, but she braved him.

The ring of his laughter filled the little, dark, old shop, and made the proprietor blink.

"Oh, I guess not," he said again, and with that he seemed to make an end of her hesitations. There was not another objection she could bring up. She let him draw the ring off

her hand with a mingled feeling of reluctance and relief. She saw him turn briskly to the shopkeeper.

"Now, Joe, how much you want?" That much she heard as she turned away with a fear lest it might, and a hope that it would be, too much for him!

She lingered away to the door, through whose upper glazed half she saw the street swarming and sunny, picked out with streamers of red and squares of green. The murmur of traffic outside was faint to her ears. The murmur of the two voices talking on inside the shop momently grew fainter. She looked behind her and saw them now in the back of the shop, close by the grinning brazier.

The light of it showed what would have been otherwise dark. It showed her Harry, straddling, hands in pockets, hat thrust back, a silhouette as hard as if cast in cold metal. The aspect of him, thus, was strange, not quite unlike himself, but giving her the feeling that she

had never known how much Harry smoothed over.

Perhaps men were always like that with men. Still she looked away again because she felt she had taken a liberty in catching him when he was coming out so plain and coming out so positive to the shopkeeper, whom he seemed really to be bullying. She felt that, considering the sapphire, nothing that went on about it could be too extraordinary. And yet the tone their voices were taking on made her nervous. Whatever they were arguing about, she found it hard to go on standing thus with her back to it, and for so long, while her expectancy tightened, and her unreasonable idea that she did not want the ring, more and more took hold of her. If he did not want to sell it, why not let it go—the beautiful thing!

She thought she would call Harry, and suggest it—but no. She hesitated. She would give them a chance to finish it themselves. She would count ten pigtails past the window first.

She watched the last far into the distance, and still she was there, blowing hot and cold. She would call to Harry—call out to him from where she stood, that she wouldn't have the thing.

She turned, and there they were yet. They had not moved. The shadow of the gesticulating little Chinaman danced like a bird on the wall, and before him Harry glowed, immovable, but ruddy, as if the hard metal whereof he was cast was slowly heating through. The thought came to her then. Harry was iron! The hard shade of his profile on the wall, the stiff movement of his lips, the forward thrust of his head on his shoulders gave her another thought. Was Harry also brutal? The sight of that brutality awake, feeding, as it were, on the fluttering little figure before it, distressed her. How long were they going on putting an edge to their argument? There was continually with her the fear that it might sharpen into a quarrel; for now the goldsmith had ceased his gesticulation and became suddenly immobile, and

still Harry was requiring of him the same thing. It was insisted upon, by all the lines of his stiff braced figure, and she had a fluttered expectancy that if the little man didn't do something quickly, now—now it would happen.

What she expected of Harry, a violent act or a quick relaxation of his iron mood, she had not time to consider, for the shopkeeper had moved. He was jerking his head, his thumb, and finally his arm in the direction of the long, dim passage—such a pointed direction, such a singular gesture, as to startle her with its incongruity. What had that to do with the price of the ring? And if it had nothing to do with the price of the ring, what had they been talking about? Her small scruple against knowing what was going on behind her was forgotten. Indeed, now she was oblivious of everything else. She was taking it in with all her eyes, when Harry turned and looked at her. And, oddly enough, she thought he looked as if he wondered how she came there. She saw him return to it slowly. Then, in a flash, he

met her brilliantly. He came toward her out of the gloom, holding the ring before him, as if with the light of that, and the flash of his smile, he was anxious immediately to cover his deficit.

"I had the very devil of a time getting it," he said. "The little beggar didn't want to let me have it." But there was a subsiding excitement in his face, and a something in his manner, both triumphant and troubled, which his explanation did not reasonably account for. Had Harry felt the touch of the same strange influence that the little shop, and the blue-eyed Chinaman, and the sapphire, had wrought around her? Or was it something more salient, the same thing that had suggested itself to her with the violent gesticulation of the shopkeeper at the passage—that some question other than the mere transfer of the ring had come up between them?

"Harry"—she hesitated—"are you quite sure it's all right?"

"All right?" The sudden edge in his voice

made her look at him. "Why, it's genuine, if that's what you mean."

It hadn't been, quite; but her meaning was too vague to put into words—a mere sensation of uneasiness. She watched Harry turn the ring over, as if he were reluctant to let it go out of his hands. And then, looking at her, she thought his glance was a little uncertain. She thought he hesitated, and when he finally slid the ring over her finger, "I wouldn't wear it until it is reset," he said. "That setting isn't gold. It's hardly decent."

"Yes," she assented; "Clara will laugh at us."

"She won't if we don't show it to her until it's fit to appear. In fact, I would rather you wouldn't. As it is now, the thing doesn't represent my gift to you."

She felt this was Harry's conventional streak asserting itself. But even she had to admit that an engagement ring which was palpably not gold was rather out of the way.

"You'd better keep it a day or two and look it over and make up your mind how you want

it set, and then we'll spring it on them," he advised.

But now it was finally on her finger, she did not want to think it would ever have to be taken off again. She drew her glove over it. The great facets showed sharp angles under the thin kid. She wished the sapphire were not quite so large, so difficult to reconcile with everything else. Now that she had the perfect thing with her, clasping her so heavily around the third finger, she was half afraid it was going to be too much for her, after all.

VII

A SPELL IS CAST

IT was hers! She did not believe it. It had been done too quickly. It seemed to her she had hardly felt Harry slip it on her finger before they had left the shop; that she had hardly shaken off the musty inclosed atmosphere, before Harry had left her on the corner of California and Powell Streets—left her alone with the ring! Still, she didn't believe she had it, even while she looked at the large lump it made under her glove. She kept feeling it with a cautious finger-tip.

A trio of girls she knew flocked off the California Street car and surrounded her. They were going to the White House for bargains in shirt waists. They wanted to carry her off in their company. They encompassed her in a

chatter of lace and lingerie. There were held up to her all the interests of her every-day existence; but these seemed to have no part in her real life. They had never appeared more remote and trivial. She kept her conscious hand in the folds of her skirt. She would have liked to strip off her glove and show them the ring. It would have entertained them so much. To herself its entertainment was of the Arabian Nights—the way of its finding, its beauty in the false setting, the struggle over it in the shop—all were wine to her imagination. It was a thing to conjure adventure; it was a talisman of romance.

She colored faintly as she mentally corrected herself. It was her engagement ring, and as such she had never once thought of it. Strange, when all the forms of her engagement had been so well observed; when Harry himself represented that side of life to which she had tried to form herself from as far back as the old days when her mother had made fun of her fancies. It must be right, she thought, this life of conventions and forms; and the queer way she saw

things, something wrong in her. But because she knew herself different, and because she felt life without understanding it, she feared it. It was too big to take hold of alone. And she was so alone; and Harry was so strong, so matter-of-fact; alone like herself, yet adequate in the world she was afraid of. She had accepted him as naturally, and yet as unreally, as she took all that life, and to the moment she had never questioned the wisdom or the happiness. She didn't question now. She only was shocked that so large a fact in her life as her engagement could be completely wiped out for the moment by a thing so trivial. It was not even the ring. It was the feeling she had about the ring. Her imagination was always running away with her, as it had the night at the club. And here it was, still uncurbed, speeding her forward into fields of romance.

She went over whole dramas—imaginary histories of chance and circumstance—woven about the ring, as she walked up and down the long, windy hills, westward and homeward, the blue

bay on the one hand beaten green under the rising "trade," and the fog coming in before her. With the experience of the morning, and the exercise and the lively air, her spirits were riding high. From time to time she had the greatest longing to peep again at the sapphire, but not until the house door had closed after her did she dare draw off her glove and look. It was still glorious. What a pity she must take it off! Yet that point Harry had made about not showing it had been too sharp to be disregarded. But what could she say, supposing Clara asked about the morning's expedition? At this thought all her spring deserted her, and she went slowly up the stair. Perhaps Clara had forgotten about it, and then it recurred reassuringly to her mind how seldom Clara touched anywhere near the subject of her engagement.

None the less, she went very softly down the hall, anxious lest Clara might open her door and ask what she had brought home with her.

But even in the refuge of her own rooms the ring encircled Flora with unease. The light

of it on her finger made her restless. It wasn't that she was apprehensive of it, but she could not forget it. She could hear the maid Marrika moving about in the room beyond. She could hear the rustle of clothes carried to and fro. She knew there were things to dress for—a luncheon, and a bevy of teas—things which must be gone through with, things which at other times she had found sufficiently pleasurable. But now, try as she would to turn her mind to these, it persistently wandered back to the jewel. All the fine, simple pleasure of the morning was dazzled out by it. She slipped it off her finger on to the dressing-table, and it lay among her laces like a purple prism, cast by some unearthly sun in a magic glass. She had jewels, rubies even—the most precious—but nothing that gave her this sense of individual beauty, of beauty so keen as to be disturbing. She emptied her jewel casket in a glittering heap around it. It shone out unquenched. It had not been the dingy little shop, and the dingy little street, and the odds and ends of jade and

tarnished silver that had made it of such a value. It seemed to her that any eye would fix it, any hand pluck it out first from that shining heap before her.

Marrika was coming in, and quickly Flora swept the jewels and the sapphire back into the casket, turned the key upon them, and thrust it back in the far corner of the drawer. She would give every one a great surprise when the ring was properly set. She glanced nervously over her shoulder to see if Marrika had noticed her action. The Russian had been moving to and fro between the wardrobe and the dressing-table with a droning thread of song. And now she took up the combs and brushes, and filling her mouth with pins, began on the long river of yellow-brown hair that flowed down Flora's back. The broad, pale face reflected beside her own in the mirror was reassuring by its serene indifference. She had soothing hands, Marrika. It was a luxury to be dressed by her, a mental soporific. But to-day it wrought no relaxation in Flora's tightened nerves. All the while she

was being combed and laced and hooked her eyes were alertly on the dressing-table drawer, that remained a little open; and presently she caught herself vaguely speculating on how, after she had been fastened up and into her clothes so securely, she could dispose upon herself the sapphire. How had she arrived at this consideration? No course of reasoning led up to it. She was annoyed with herself. If she wasn't going to wear the ring on her finger, and show it, why did she want to take it with her at all? For fear it might be lost? Lost, in her jewel box, in the back of the drawer! She blushed for herself. She looked severely at her guilty reflection in the mirror. Perhaps she did look tall; yes, and outwardly sophisticated, but underneath that bold exterior Flora knew she was only the smallest, youngest, most ridiculous child ever born. There were moments when this fact appeared to her more vividly than at others. One had been the other night when Kerr's eyes had looked through and through her; and here she was again, when

she was going to a girls' luncheon, and most wanted to feel competent, stared out of countenance by the wonderful eye of a ring.

Through the long afternoon it was more apparent to her than the faces of the people around her. She was restless to get back to it, but people talked interminably. At the luncheon they talked of Kerr. Flora knew these girls felt a little resentment that she had so easily captured Harry Cressy; for Harry had been more than an eligible man in the little city. He had been an eligible personage. Not that he had money; not that his family tree was plainly planted in their midst; but that without these two things he had achieved what, with these things, the people he knew were all striving for. He stood before them as the embodiment of what they most believed in—perfect bodily splendor, and perfect knowledge of how to get on with the world; and the fact that he wouldn't quite be one of them, but after five years still stood a little off—made him shine with greater brilliance, especially in the eyes of these young

girls. It was hard, they seemed to feel, that such an apparently remote and difficult person should have succumbed so easily; and now that a new luminary of equal luster was apparent in their sky, Flora felt their remarks a little triumphantly aimed at her. It was odd to her that they should envy her anything, especially those one or two exquisite flowers of old families, whose lovely eyes saw not one inch farther than her turquoise collar. And the way they talked of Kerr, with flourishes, made her feel a faint, responsive irritation that he had talked to so many of them in exactly the same way.

But between the threads of interest the table group wove together, kept flashing up her furtive desire to be away, to be at home, to see what had happened to the sapphire. Of course, she knew that nothing could have happened; but she wanted to look at it, to open the casket and see the flash of it before her eyes. For was she quite sure that it was not one of those fairy gifts, which, put into the hand in a blaze of beauty, may be found in the pocket as withered

leaves? Yet her tenacious nets of duty caught and caught, and again caught her, so that when the carriage finally fetched her home it was between lighted street-lamps.

They were dining early that night on account of the Bullers' box party, but it was nearly eight o'clock before Flora reached the house. And it was, of course, for that reason that she ran up-stairs—ran wildly, regardlessly, before the eyes of Shima—and along the hall, her high heels clacking on the hard floors, and through her bedroom to the dressing-room, snatched open the table drawer, unlocked the casket with a twitch of the key—and, ah, it was there! It was really real! Why, what had she expected? She was laughing at herself.

She was gay in her relief at getting back to the sapphire, but at the same time she was already wondering what she should do about it that night—take it with her or leave it alone? Dared she wear it on her finger under her glove? Clara might notice the unfamiliar form of the jewel through the thin kid. Harry's

warning had been phrased conventionally enough, but the hints his words conveyed had expanded in her mind—fear not only of Clara's laughter, that such a jewel had come from a junk shop, but of her wonder, her questions, her ability of getting out the story of the whole erratic proceeding, even to the strange pantomime between Harry and the blue-eyed Chinaman. Clara was marvelous!

Flora watched her curiously across the table that evening, wondering what was that quality of hers by which she acquired. Hitherto Flora had accepted it as a fact without question, but now she had a desire to place it. It was not beauty, for though Clara was pretty, like a polished Greuze, she was colorless and flavorless, lacking the vivid heat of magnetism. More probably it consisted in a certain sort of sweetness Clara could produce on occasions, a way she had of looking and speaking which Flora could only describe as smooth. But smooth without texture or softness; smooth as quick-flowing water, smooth as glass—a surface upon which even cau-

tion might lose its equilibrium. For the danger in Clara was that she was disarming. There was nothing antagonistic in her. One noticed her slowly. The flat tones of her voice made background for other people's conversations. The pale tints of her gown blended with the pale tones of her hair and flesh. Beside Clara's exquisite gradations Flora felt herself without shades, a creature of violent contrasts and impulses. If Clara had been going to carry the ring about with her she would have had a reason for it. But Flora had nothing but a silly fancy.

She made up her mind to leave the sapphire at home; but in her last moment in her room the resolution failed her. Harry, of course, would be angry if he knew, but Harry wouldn't see the thing under her glove.

She came down to where Clara was waiting for her, with the guilty feeling of a child who has concealed a contraband cake; but the way Clara looked her over made her conscious that she had not concealed her excitement. Clara

was always cool. What would it be like, she wondered, to feel the same about everything? How would it seem to be no more elated by the expectation of listening to the most beautiful of tenors than over the next meeting of the Decade Club? Was that what she was coming to in time? Not to-night, she thought; and not, at least, while that talisman of romance clasped her around the third finger.

VIII

A SPARK OF HORROR

THEY found Harry waiting for them in the theater lobby. He had come up too late from Burlingame to do more than meet the party there. The Bullers were already in the box, he said, and the second act of *I' Pagliacci* just beginning.

As they came to the door of the box the lights were down, the curtain up on a dim stage, and the chorus still floating into the roof, while the three occupants of the box were indistinguishable figures, risen up and shuffling chairs to the front for Flora and Clara. It was too dark to distinguish faces.

But dark as it was, Flora knew who was sitting behind her. She heard him speaking. Un-

der the notes of the recitative he was speaking to Clara. The pleasure of finding him here was sharpened by the surprise. She listened to his voice, the mere intonation of which brought back to her their walk through the Presidio woods as deliciously as if she were still there.

Then, as the tenor took up the theme, all talking ceased—Ella's husky whisper, Clara's smoother syllables, and the flat, slow, variable voice of Kerr—the whole house seemed to sink into stiller repose; the high chords floated above the heads of the black pit like colored bubbles, and Flora forgot the sapphire in the triple spell of the singing, the darkness, and the face she was yet to see. She felt relaxed and released from her guard by this darkness around her, that blotted out the sea of faces beneath, that dissolved the walls and high galleries, that obscured the very outline of the box where she sat, until she seemed to be poised, halfway up a void of darkness, looking into a pit in the hollowness of which a voice was singing.

The stage was a narrow shelf of wood swung

in that void, from which the voice sang, and a bare finger of light followed it about from place to place. The sweet, searching tenor notes, the semblance of passion and reality the gesticulating Frenchman threw over all the stage, and the *crescendo* of the tragedy carried her into a mood that barred out Ella, barred out Clara, barred out Harry more than any; but, unaccountably, Kerr was still with her. He was there by no will of hers, but by some essence of his own, some quality that linked him, as it linked her, to the passionate subtleties of life. He seemed to her the eager spirit that was prompting and putting forward this comedy and tragedy playing on before her. She heard him reasserted, vigorous, lawless, wandering, in the voice of the mimic strolling player addressing his mimic audience. The appeal of the tenor to the voiceless galleries, "Underneath this little play we show, there is another play," seemed indeed the very voice of Kerr repeating itself. And with the climax of the sharp tragedy in the middle of the comic stage she

placed him again, but placed him this time in the mimic audience looking on, neither applauding nor dissenting; but rather as if he watched the play and played it, too.

The lights went up with a spring. A wave of motion flickered over the house, the talking voices burst forth all at once, and she saw him, really saw him for the first time that evening, as in her fancy, part of the audience; as in her fancy, neither applauding nor dissenting, yet with what a difference! He leaned back in his chair, and leaned his head a little back, as if, for weariness, he wished there were a rest behind it; and how indifferently, how critically, how levelly he surveyed the fluttered house, and the figures in the box beside him! How foreign he appeared to the ardent spirit who had dominated the dark; how emptied of the heat of imagination, how worn, how dry; and even in his salience, how singularly pathetic! He was neither the satanic person of the first night, nor her comrade of the Presidio hills. And if the expression of his face was not quite so cheap as

cynicism, it was just the absence of belief in anything.

She felt a lump in her throat, an ache of the cruelest disappointment, as though some masker, masking as the fire of life, had suddenly removed the covering of his face and showed her the burnt-out bones beneath. The shift from what she remembered him to what he now appeared was too rapid and considerable for her. She found herself looking at him through a mist of tears—there in the heart of publicity, in the middle of the circle of red velvet curtains!

He turned and saw her. She watched a smile of the frankest pleasure rising, as it were, to the surface of his weary preoccupation. Something had delighted him. Why, it was herself —just her being there! And she could only helplessly blink at him. Was ever anything so stupid as to be caught in tears over nothing! For the next moment he had caught her. She knew by the change of his look, interrogative, amused, incredulous. He straightened and leaned forward.

"Really," he said, "you must remember that little man has only gone out for a glass of beer."

So he thought it was the tenor who had brought her to the point of tears.

"Ah, why do you say that?" she protested.

He continued to smile indulgently upon her. "Would you really rather believe it true?"

"I don't know. But I wish *you* hadn't thought of the beer."

He brought the glare of his monocle to bear full upon her. "Why not? It is all we make sure of."

So he had taken that side of it. By his words as well as his looks he repudiated all the gallant show of romance he had paraded to her before, and had taken up the cause of the world as flatly as Harry could have done.

"Oh, if to be sure is all you want," she burst out; "but you don't mean it! Wouldn't you rather have something beautiful you weren't sure of, than something certain that didn't matter?"

He nodded to this quite casually, as if it were an old acquaintance.

"Oh, yes; but the time comes round when you want to be sure of something. The sun never sets twice alike over Mont Pelee; but you can always get the same brand of lager to-day that you had the week before." He looked at her with a faint amusement. "And by your expression I take it you don't know how fine some of those brands are. Life is not half bad—even when it is only a means to the beer."

Under these garish lights, in the middle of this theater of people, facing the bland, almost banal, stare of that monocle, it looked exceedingly probable that, after all, in spite of her dreaming, this was what life would prove to be. But she hated the thought, as she hated that Kerr should be the one to show it to her; as she would have hated her ring if, after all its splendor in the shop, it should have turned out to be a piece of colored glass.

"No, no! I won't believe you," she stoutly denied him. "There *is* more in life than you

can touch. You're not like yourself to say there is not."

He laughed, but rather shortly.

"My dear child, forgive me; I'm sulky to-night. I feel, as I felt at eighteen, that the world has treated me badly. I've lost my luck."

The way his voice dropped at the last sounded to her the weariest thing she had ever heard. He settled back in his chair again, and looked moodily out across the brilliant house.

"I'm sorry." Her tone was sweetly vague. What could be the matter with him? Then, half timidly, she rallied him. "If you go on like this, I shall have to show you my talisman."

"Oh, have you indeed a talisman?" he humored her. And it was as if he said, "Oh, have you a doll?" He did not even turn his head to look at her.

She was chilled. She felt the disappointment, that his quick smile had lightened, return upon her. She hardly noticed the rise of the curtain on the second little play, and the singing voices did not reach her with any poignancy.

She was vaguely aware of movements in the box—of Harry's coming in, of Clara's little rustle making room for him, of the shift of Ella's chair away from the business of listening, toward him, and her husky whisper going on with some prolonged tale of dull escapade; but to Flora they all made only a banal background for the brooding silence of her companion. He had thrown his mood over her until she was ready to doubt even the potency of her talisman to counteract it.

She felt of the stone. She drew off her glove and tried to look at it in the dim light, but couldn't get a gleam out of it. She was as impatient for the lights to go up that she might secretly be cheered by its wonder, as she had been that afternoon to get back from the luncheon, and make sure it was still in the drawer. She must see it in spite of Clara at her right hand, whose little chiseled profile might turn upon her at any moment a full face of inquiry.

She held her left hand low in the shadow of

her chair; and if, as the lights went up again, there was any change in the sapphire, it was merely a sharper brilliance, as if, like an eye, it had moods, and this was one of its moments of excitement. In its extraordinary luster it seemed to possess a beauty that could not be valued; and she wanted to hold it up to Kerr, to see if she couldn't startle him out of his mood—to see if he wouldn't respond to it, "Yes, there is more in it than you can touch."

She turned to him with the daring flash of timid spirits. It was so sharp a motion that he started instantly from his reverie to meet it, but his alacrity was mechanical. She felt the smile he summoned was slow, as if he returned, from a long distance, a little painfully to his present surroundings.

The *Intermezzo* was playing, and to speak under the music he leaned so close his shoulder touched her chair. Through that narrow space between them, almost beneath his eyes, she moved her hand—a gesture so slightly emphasized as to seem accident. He had started to speak, but

her motion seemed to stop his tongue. He looked hard at her hand, and something violent in his intentness made her clutch the side of the chair. Instantly she met his look, so fiercely, cruelly challenging, that it took her like a blow. For a moment they looked at each other, her eyes wide with fright, his narrowed to a glare under the terrible intentness of his brows. What had she done? What threatened her? What could save her in this sea of people? Then, while she gazed, his challenge burned out to a pale hard scrutiny, that faded to no expression at all—or was it that any expression would have seemed dim after the terrible one that had flashed across his face?

She was as shaken as if he had seized hold of her. If he had snatched the ring off her finger she wouldn't have been more shocked. The whole box must be transfixed by him, and the whole house be looking at nothing but their little circle of horror! She was ready for it. She was braced for anything but the fact which actually confronted her—that no one had noticed them at all. It was monstrous that such a thing

could have been without their knowing! But there was no face in all the orchestra, the crowded galleries, or the tiers of boxes to affirm that anything had happened; no face in their own box had even stirred, but Clara's, and that had merely turned from profile to the full, faintly inquiring, mild, and palely pink in the warm reflections of the red velvet curtains.

And what could Clara have seen, if she had seen at all, but Flora a little paler than usual with a hand that trembled; and what worse could Clara conjecture than that she was being silly about Kerr? She turned slowly toward him, and looked at him with a courage that was part of her fear. But wasn't she, in a way, being silly about Kerr? What had become of his expression that had threatened her? There was nothing left of it but her own violent impression—and the longer Kerr sat there, talking from her to Clara, from Clara to Judge Buller, his eyes keeping pace with his light conversational flights, the less Flora felt sure he had ever fixed her with that intensity.

And yet the thing had actually happened. Its evidence was before her. He had been silent. Now he was talking. He had been absent. Now she thought she had never seen him more vividly concerned with the moment. Yet for all his cool looks and diffuse talk around the box, she felt uneasily that his concern was pointed at her, and that he would never let her go. He only waited for the cover of the last act to come back to her single-handed.

She would have deflected his attack, but it was too quick, too unexpected for her to do more than sit helpless, and let him lift up her left hand, delicately between thumb and finger, as if in itself it was some rare, fine curio, and, bending close, contemplate the sapphire unwinkingly. She had an instant when she thought she must cry out, but how impossible in the awful publicity of her place—a pinnacle in the face of thousands! And after the first fluttered impulse came a certain reassurance in such a frank and trivial action. For all its intensity, how could it be construed otherwise than a lively if unconven-

tional interest? It must have been her own fancy which had discerned anything more than that in his first look at her. And yet, when he had laid her hand lightly back, and readjusted his monocle, and looked out, away from her, across the black house, she didn't know whether she was more reassured or troubled because he had not spoken a word. Yet the next moment he looked around at her.

"We shan't meet every evening in such a way as this," he said, and left the statement dangling unanswerable between them. It sounded portentous—final. She wondered that in the middle of her fear it could strike such a sharp note of regret in her. She knew she would regret not meeting him again; and yet she shrank from the thought she could still want to meet him. By one look her whole feeling of sympathy, of reliance, of admiration, that had flowed out to him so naturally she had scarcely been aware of it, had been troubled and mixed with fear. She couldn't answer. She could only look at him with a reflection of her trouble in her face.

"Are you surprised that I thought of that?" he inquired. "It's not so odd as you seem to think that I should want to see you again. I don't want to leave it to chance; do you?" He shot the question at her so suddenly, with such a casual eye, and such dry gravity of mouth, that he had her admission out of her before she realized the extent of its meaning. And the way he took that admission for granted, and overlooked her confusion, made her feel that for the sake of whatever he was after he was intentionally ignoring what it did not suit his convenience to see. She knew he must have seen; that every moment while she had changed and fluttered his eye had never left her.

"Then when are you at home?" he asked her; and by his tone, he conveyed the impression that he was only making courteous response to some invitation she had offered him; though, when she thought, she had not offered it, he had got it out of her. He had got it by sheer impertinence. But none the less he had it. She couldn't escape him there.

She answered somewhat stiffly: "Fridays, second and fourth."

He looked at her with a humorous twist of mouth. "What? So seldom?"

She was impotent if he wouldn't be snubbed; but at the worst she wouldn't be cornered. "Oh, dear, no—but people who come at other times take a chance."

"Does that mean that I may take mine to-morrow?"

He was pressing her too hard. Why was he so anxious to see her, as he had not been the first night or yesterday, or even ten minutes ago? She, who, ten minutes ago, would have been glad, now was doing her best to put him off. She was silent a moment, considering the conventions, and then, like him, she abandoned them. Without a word she turned away from him. Whatever she said, he had her. But, if she said nothing and still he came to-morrow, whatever she did then, he would have to take the consequences of his insistence. Her only desire now was to evade him, lest he should force her out

of her non-committal attitude. She wanted to shield herself from further pursuit.

She couldn't escape yet, for the figures on the stage were still gesticulating and trilling, and the people around her, in the small inclosure where she sat, hemmed her in so that she could no more move away from Kerr than if she had been that impaled specimen he had made her feel at their first meeting. The most she could do was to turn away, but even thus, with her eyes averted and her ears full of Ella's voice, she was still acutely aware of him, sitting looking straight before him across the black house with a face worn, wary, weathered to any catastrophe, and such an air of being alertly fixed on something a long way off, that her silence made no more difference to him than her flutterings and her rudeness. And yet she knew he was only waiting; waiting his chance to get at her again and make her commit herself; and that, she was determined, should not happen.

What had already happened, through its very violence, had left an impression like a dream.

It seemed unreal, and yet it had made her forget everything else—the stage, the people around her, and even the very sapphire that had generated her inexplicable situation. She drew her glove over the ring. The lights were imminent. It would be hard to hide the great flash of the jewel. And besides, she didn't trust it. She couldn't tell in what direction it might not strike out a spark of horror next.

The rustle of final departure was all over the house. The people in the box were stirring and beginning to stand up; and Flora saw Kerr turn and look at her. She wanted some one to stand between herself and Kerr, and it was to Harry that she turned; not alone that he was so large and adequate, but because she thought she saw in him an inclination to step into that very place where she wanted him. She saw he was a little sullen, and though she didn't suspect him quite of jealousy, she wondered if he had not a right to blame her for the appearance of flirtation that she and Kerr must have presented. Then how much more might he blame her for

what she had actually done—for deliberately showing the sapphire to Kerr! The very thought of it frightened her. She knew she was rattling to Harry all the while he fetched her cloak and put it on her, and she was glad now of that ability she had cultivated in herself of making a smooth crust of talk over her seething feelings. She talked the harder, she even took hold of Harry's arm to be sure of keeping him there between her and what she was afraid of, as they came out on the sidewalk and stood waiting in the windy night for the approach of their carriage lights.

Row upon row of street lamps flared in the traveling gusts. The midnight noises of the city were at their loudest; and half their volume seemed to be a scattered chorus of hoarse voices yelling all together like a pack of wolves. Thin, ragged shapes shot in and out among the crowd, ducked under horses' feet and cut wild zigzags across the street like flying goblins. The sense of their cry was indistinguishable, but it was the same—the same inarticulate shape of sound on every tongue. First one throat, then

another took up the raucous singsong shout, then all together again, as if the pack were in full cry on the scent of something. What was this fresh quarry of the press, Flora wondered, that made it give tongue so hideously? The hunting note of it made her want to cover her ears, and yet she strained to catch its meaning.

She had stooped her head to the carriage door, when Harry stopped and took one of the damp papers from a crier in the pack. She saw the head-line. It covered half the sheet—the great figure that was offered for the return of the Chatworth ring.

IX

ILLUMINATION

JUST when the two ideas had coalesced in her mind Flora couldn't be sure. It had been some time in the first dark hour that she had spent wide awake in her bed. There had been two ideas distinctly. Two impressions of the evening remained with her; and the last one, the great figures that had stared at her from the paper, the fact that had been Harry's secret, made common now in round numbers, had for the moment swallowed up the first.

For all the way home that sum was kept before her by Clara's talk. She could remember nothing of that talk except that it hadn't been able for a moment to leave the Chatworth ring alone. It had been aimed at Harry, but it had

fallen to Flora herself to answer Clara's quick speculations, for Harry had been obstinately silent, though not indifferent, as if in his own mind he was as unable to leave it alone as Clara. One with his silence, one with her talk, they had written the figures of the reward so blazingly in Flora's mind that for the moment she could see nothing else. Yet now she was alone her first adventure recurred to her. As soon as she was quiet in the dark there came back with reminiscent terror the look that Kerr had given her in the box. She wasn't really afraid of Kerr himself. She was afraid of the meaning of his look which she didn't understand. It only established in her mind a great significance for the sapphire, if it could produce such an expression on a human face. It had given him more than a mere expression. It had given him an impulse for pursuit, as if, like a magnet, it was fairly dragging him. He had covered his impulse by his very frankness, but she knew he had pursued her—that for the matter of seeing her again he had hunted her down. And what

had followed that? Why, she was back again to the great figures in the paper.

At first it seemed as though she had taken a clean leap from one subject to another. She had in no way connected them. But all at once they were connected. She couldn't separate them. She didn't know whether she had been stupid not to have seen them so before, or whether she was stupid to see them so now. For the thought that had sprung up in her mind was monstrous. It startled her so broad awake that she sat up in bed to meet it the more alertly. She sat up trembling. She felt like one who has walked a long way in a wood, hearing crafty footsteps following in the bushes. And now the beast had sprung out, and she was panting, terrified, not knowing which way to run.

The room was dark except for now and again the yellow square of light, from some passing cable car, traveling along the ceiling. The four walls around her, their dark bulks of furniture and light ripple of moving curtains, shut her up with this monster of her mind. The longer she

looked at it the less she felt sure it was real, and yet it was before her. It was there with none of the loveliness of her first fancies about the ring. It was there with grisly reality. It had not been conjured up. It had sprung upon her from the solid actualities of the night. And, yes, of the day before—and the night before that. Oh, she had known well enough that there had been something wrong at the goldsmith's shop. She had felt it even before she had seen the sapphire; and afterward how it had held them, both herself and Harry! To have moved Harry it must be something indeed! Had he suspected it then, or had he only wondered?

If he had suspected why hadn't he spoken of it? Well, her appalling fancy prompted, hadn't he spoken of it?—though not to her. There flashed back to her the memory of him there in the back of the shop with the blue-eyed Chinaman. How furiously he had assailed the little man! How uneasily, with what a dissatisfied air he had looked at the ring even after it was on her finger, as if, after all, he had not compassed

what he had wanted. She could be almost sure that the monstrous idea which had just overtaken her had, however fleetingly, flashed before Harry's mind in the goldsmith's shop. But surely he couldn't have entertained it for a moment. That was impossible, or he would never have let her take the sapphire—Harry, who had seen the ring, the very Crew Idol itself, within the twenty-four hours.

"A little heathen god curled round himself with a big blue stone on the top of his head." Harry hadn't said what sort of stone it was; but Kerr had said it was a sapphire. There was a sapphire on her hand now. She touched it with her finger-tips cautiously, as if to touch something hot. So near to her! In the same room with her! On her own hand! It was too much to be alone with in the dark! She reached out softly, as if she feared to disturb some threatening presence lurking around her, and lit the small night lamp on the low table by her bed. The shade was yellow, and that contended with the blue of the sapphire, but couldn't break its

light. With the first flash of its splendor in her face she felt certainty threatening her. She shook the ring quickly off her finger and it fell with a light clatter on the table's marble top—fell with the sapphire face down, and all its light hidden. She took it up again a little fearfully, as if it might have got some harm; and again while she looked at it it seemed to her that nothing that happened about this jewel could be too extraordinary. If only it had been less wonderful, less beautiful, she would not have felt so terribly afraid! She put it back on the table and for a moment held her hand over it, as if she imprisoned a living thing.

Then, without looking again, she got out of bed and went to the window. It overlooked the dark steep of the garden, the moving trees and the lighter plane of the water. She leaned out, far out. Black housetops marched against the bay, and between them, light by light, her eyes followed the street-lamps down to the shore. If one could recover from such a nightmare as she had it would be by leaning out

into and facing this wide soft dark. These shapeless roofs just below her the night made mysterious; and yet they covered people that she knew—her friends—kind, safe people! There had been nights when the city, through this very window, had seemed to her a savage place; but now the wicked fear that stood behind her—the fear that had got inside her house, that had slipped unseen through the circle of friends, that stood behind her now, filling her own room with its shadowy menace—had transformed the city into a very haven of security.

Oh, to escape out of this window into the innocent, sleeping city, away from the horror at her back! To look in from the outside and be even sure there was a horror! And if there was, to run away into the wide soft dark! But how did she know, her fantastic idea persisted, that the sapphire wouldn't follow her—the sapphire itself—the embodiment of her fear? Then she dared not be driven out.

But there was another way to be rid of it. The real idea occurred to her. How easy it

would be to take it—that beautiful thing—and throw it; throw it as hard as she could, and let the night take care of it. The window was open, as if it stood ready, and there was the ring on the table. She went to it, looked at it a moment without touching it, holding her hands away.

Then with a little shiver she backed away from it and sat down on the foot of the bed. She looked pale and little, as if the eye of the ring, blazing under the feeble lamp, like the evil eye, had sapped her fire and youth. The only thing about her of any size and color was the heavy braid of hair fallen over her shoulder. She hugged her arms around her updrawn knees, and resting her chin upon them eyed the sapphire bravely.

"What shall I do with you?" she somberly inquired of it. "You are a dreadful thing. I don't know where you came from nor what you are, but I am afraid—I am afraid you are—" She hesitated. The sapphire lay shining like some idol set up for worship, and in spite of herself its beauty moved her, if not to worship, at least to awe and fear.

"I suppose you know I can't throw you away," she murmured, "and yet I can't keep you!" She pondered, chin in hand. To take it to Harry! That seemed the natural thing to do—the simplest way to be rid of it. She hesitated.

"If I only *knew!* If I only were sure!" She locked her fingers closer, staring hard. If it had been the whole Crew Idol, the undismembered god himself, then there would have been less terror, and one plain thing to do. She looked hard at the sapphire setting, as if she hoped to discover upon its brilliance some tell-tale trace of old soft gold; but there was only one great, glassy, polished eye, and out of what head it had come, whether from the forehead of the Crew Idol, or from that of some unheralded deity, who was there who could tell her?

She tried to summon a coherent thought, but again it was only a flash out of the darkness.

"Kerr! Why, he knows more than I." She looked at this stupidly for a moment as if it were too large to take in at once. Of course he must have known! Why hadn't she thought of

that before? Why hadn't she thought of it that first moment, when he had turned on her in the box with such terrible eyes? She drew in her shoulders, looking all around at the dim corners of the room which the lamp flame failed to penetrate. Behind her present lively fear a second shadow was growing, more dim, more formless, more vast and dubious.

What series of circumstances might have led up to Kerr's knowledge she could not dream. He was one of whom nothing was incredible. From the first moment his face had shot into the light, from the moment she had heard his voice, like color in the level voices around him, she had been bewildered by his variety. He had caught her up to the clouds. He had whirled her along dubious levels, and more than once he had shown her that the lines she had supposed drawn so sharply between this and that could no more be discerned than meridians on green earth.

If she had noticed any earnestness in him, it was his relish, his gusto for the whole of life. He had no theory to set up. Just as it was he

took it. If he persisted in requiring people to be themselves it was for no good to themselves, but for the pleasure he himself got out of it. If he made society into a little ball, and threw it away, it was only to show it could be done.

And where, she asked herself in a summing up, might such a man not be found? But there were few places, indeed, in even the broadest plain of possibility, which could hold knowledge of so particular and piercing a quality as his look had implied. There had been so much more than curiosity or surprise in it. She could hardly face the memory of it, so cruelly it had struck her. There was no doubt in her mind that Kerr had seen the ring. Somewhere in the pageant of his experience he had met it, known it—but what he wanted of it—

She broke off that thought, and looked long at the little flame of the lamp. It was strange, but there was no doubt in her mind but that he wanted it. That had been the strongest thing in his look. She felt herself picking her way along a very narrow path, one step over either

edge of which would plunge her chasms deep. Now she snatched at a frail sapling to save herself. The fact that Kerr knew her stone didn't prove it belonged to the Crew Idol. And if it didn't—if it wasn't the crown of the heathen god, then her whole dreadful supposition fell to pieces. But she hadn't proved it and the simplest way was just to ask Kerr. Her chance for that was the chance he had fought so hard for, the chance of their meeting the next day.

She hadn't wanted that meeting when he had first asked her for it in the box. She had feared it then, and all the more she feared it now, because now she would have to do more than defend herself. She would take the offensive; she would make the attack, now that she had a question to ask. Why should the thought of it frighten her? If this was not the Crew sapphire she would be no worse off than she had been. If it was, her course would be clear. It seemed it should be simple, it should be easy to face Kerr with her question; but she was possessed by the apprehension that it would be neither. Would

the question she had to ask be a safe thing to give him? And if she dared undertake it and should be overpowered after all—then everything would be lost.

What the "everything" was she feared to lose would not come clear to her. The only thing that did emerge definitely from the agitation of her mind was the knowledge that this question that had been thrust upon her made it tenfold more difficult to meet Kerr. And yet, to refuse to meet him now would be as cowardly as throwing the ring out of the window.

X

A LADY UNVEILED

SHE wakened in the morning to some one knocking. She thought the sound had been going on for a long time, but, now she was finally roused, it had stopped. This was odd, for no one came to her in the morning except Marrika, and it was tiresome to be thus imperatively beset before she was half awake. Now the knocking came again with a level, unimpatient repetition, and she called, "Come in!" at which Clara, in a pale morning gown, promptly entered—an apparition as cool and smooth and burnished as if she had spent the night, like a French doll, in tissue paper.

Clara's coming in in the morning was an unheard-of thing. Flora was taken aback.

"Why, Clara!" She was blank with astonish-

ment. She sat up, flushed and tumbled, and still blinking. "I hope I didn't keep you knocking long."

"Oh, no, indeed; only three taps." Clara looked straight through Flora's astonishment, as if there had been no such thing in evidence. She drew up a chair and sat down beside the bed. It was a rocking-chair, but it did not sway with her calm poise. In the fine finish of her morning attire, with her hands placidly folded on her knee, she made Flora feel taken at a disadvantage, thus scarcely awake, disheveled and all but stripped. But Clara, if she looked at anything but Flora's eyes, looked only at her hands, one and then the other as they lay upon the coverlet.

"It isn't so very late," she said, "but I have ordered your breakfast. I thought you would want it if you had that ten-o'clock appointment; and there is something I want to ask you before you go out." Flora was conscious of a little apprehension. "It's about that place you talked of taking for the summer." She felt vaguely relieved, though she had had no actual grounds for

anticipating an awkward question. "I came upon something in the oddest way you can imagine," Clara pursued her subject. "Had you any idea the Herricks were in straits?"

"The young Herricks?"

"Oh, no! The old Herricks, *the* Herricks, Mrs. Herrick whom you so much admire! Of course, one isn't told; but they must be, to be willing to let the old place."

"Not the San Mateo place?" said Flora, with a stir of interest. She felt as astonished as if some Confucian fanatic had set up his joss at auction.

Clara complacently nodded.

"Mrs. Herrick spoke to me herself. They don't want any publicity about it, but she had heard that we were looking, and she did me the favor"—Clara smiled a little dryly—"of telling me first."

Flora looked reflective. "I've never seen it, but they say it's beautiful."

"It is, in a way," Clara grudgingly admitted, "but it isn't new; and the ridiculous part is that

she will let it only on condition that it shall not be done over. It is in sufficiently good shape, but it stands now just as Colonel Herrick furnished it forty years ago."

"Why, I should love that!" Flora frankly confessed, and gave a wistful glance at the walls around her, wondering how long before the soft, dark bloom of time, of use and wont, should descend on their crude faces.

"Well," Clara conceded, "at any rate we know it's genuine, and that's a consolation. The number of imitations going about and the way people pick them up is appalling! While I was getting that rug for you at Vigo's yesterday, Ella Buller came in and bought three imitation Bokharas, with the greatest enthusiasm. She buys quantities, and she's always taken in. It is enough to make one nervous about the people one sits next to at dinner there. One can not help suspecting them of being some of Ella's bargains. I wonder, now, where she picked up that Kerr."

This finale failed to take Flora off her guard.

"At any rate, he is odd enough to be genuine," she said with a gleam of malice.

"Oh, no doubt of that," Clara mildly assented, "but genuine what?"

"Why, gentleman at large," said Flora, and quickly wanted to recall it, for Clara's glance seemed to give it a double significance. "I mean," she added, "just one of those chronic travelers who have nothing else to do, and whose way must be paved with letters of introduction" —she floundered. "At least, that was the idea he gave of himself." She broke off, doubly angry that she had tried to explain Kerr, and tried to explain herself, when the circumstances required nothing of the sort. She was sure Clara had not missed her nervousness, though Clara made no sign. Her eyes only traveled a second time to Flora's hands, as if among the flare of red and white jewels she was expecting to see another color. To Flora's palpitating consciousness this look made a perfect connection with Clara's next remark.

"At least his manners are odd enough! There

was a minute last night when he was really quite startling."

Flora felt a small, warm spot of color increasing in the middle of each cheek. She drew a long breath, as if to draw in courage. Then Clara had really seen! That smooth, blindish look of hers, last night, had seen everything! And here she was owning up to it, and affably offering herself as a confidante; and for what reason under the sun unless to find out what it was that had so startled Kerr? Flora felt like crying out, "If you only knew what that thing may be, you would never want to come nearer to it!"

"I am afraid he annoyed you, Flora."

The girl looked into the kindly solicitude of Clara's face with a hard, almost passionate incredulity. Was that really all Clara had supposed?

"These Continentals," she went on, now lightly swaying to and fro in her chair, "have singular notions of American women. They take us for savages, my dear."

"Then isn't it for us to show them that we are

more than usually civilized? I can't run away from him like a frightened little native."

"Of course not; but that is where I come in; it's what I'm for—to get rid of such things for you." That small, cool smile made Flora feel more than ever the immature barbarian of her simile. Clara sat throwing the protection of her superior knowledge and capability around her, like a missionary garment; but Flora could have laughed with relief. Then Clara merely supposed Kerr had been impertinent. Her little invasion had been really nothing but pure kindness and protection; and Flora couldn't but feel grateful for it. Last night she had thought herself so absolutely alone; and here was a friend coming forward again, and stepping between her and the thing above all others she was helpless about—the real world.

Clara had risen, and stood considering a moment with that same sweet, impersonal eye which Flora found it hardest to comprehend.

"What I mean," she explicitly stated, "is that if he should undertake to carry out his prepos-

terous suggestion, and call this afternoon, I am quite ready, if you wish, to take him off your hands."

This last took Flora's breath away. It had not occurred to her that Clara had overheard. It shocked her, frightened her; and yet Clara's way of stating the fact, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, made Flora feel that she herself was in the wrong to feel thus. For, after all, Clara had been most tactful, most considerate and delicate in conveying her knowledge, not hinting that Flora could have been in the slightest degree responsible for Kerr's behavior; but simply sweetly taking it for granted that they, of course, were banded together to exclude this outlander. Under her sense of obligation, and what she felt ought to be gratitude, Flora floundered for words.

"You're very kind," she managed to get out; and that seemed to leave her committed to hand Kerr over, tied hand and foot, when she wasn't at all sure she wanted to.

"Then shall I tell Mrs. Herrick that you will

consider the house?" said Clara, already in the act of departure. "She is to call to-day to go into it with me more thoroughly. Thus far we've only played about the edges."

Her eyes strayed toward the dressing-table as she passed it, and as she reached the door she glanced over the chiffonier. It was on the tip of Flora's tongue to ask if she had mislaid something, when Clara turned and smiled her small, tight-curled smile, as if she were offering it as a symbol of mutual understanding. Curiously enough, it checked Flora's query about the straying glances, and made her wonder that this was the first time in their relation that she had thought Clara sweet.

But there was another quality in Clara she did not lose sight of, and she waited for the closing of a door further down the hall before she drew the sapphire from under her pillow.

With the knocking at the door her first act had been to thrust it there. The feeling that it was going to be hard to hide was still her strongest instinct about it; but the morning had dis-

sipated the element of the supernatural and the horrid that it had shown her the night before. It seemed to have a clearer and a simpler beauty; and the hope revived in her that its beauty, after all, was the only remarkable thing about it.

Her conviction of the night before had sunk to a shadowy hypothesis. She knew nothing—nothing that would justify her in taking any step; and her only chance of knowing more lay in what she would get out of Kerr; for that he knew more about her ring than she, she was convinced. She was afraid of him, yet, in spite of her fear, she had no intention of handing him over to Clara. For on reflection she knew that Clara's offer must have a deeper motive than mere kindness, and she had a most unreasonable feeling that it would not be safe. She felt a little guilty to have seemed to take her companion's help, while she left her so much at sea as to the real facts. But, after all, it was Clara who had forced the issue.

She thought a good deal about Clara while

she was dressing. A good many times lately she had looked forward to the fall, the time of her marriage, when their rather tense relationship would be ended. This house in the country, which was to be her last little bachelor fling, was to be Clara's last commission for her.

Think how she would, she could but feel as if she were ungratefully abandoning Clara. Clara had done so well by her in their three years together! There surely must be immediately forthcoming for such a remarkable person another large opportunity, and yet she couldn't help recalling their first encounter in the particularly dull boarding-house where Clara was temporarily shelved; where, nevertheless, she had not conceded an inch of her class, nor a ray of her luster to circumstance. This surprising luster was the gloss of her body, the quality of her clothes and accessories, the way she traveled and the way she smiled. It was the bloom of luxury she kept about her person through all her varying surroundings. She had

never to rise to the level of a new position; she was there already; and she never came down.

Flora knew it was for just her air of being ready that she had trusted Clara, and for the three years of their association she had never failed to find her companion ready wherever their common interests were concerned. She had no reason for not trusting Clara now, except the knowledge that, by her own approaching marriage, their interests would be separated, and her feeling that Clara's prudence must already be by way of looking out for itself alone.

Yet Clara would do a kindness if it did not inconvenience her, and surely this morning she had been kind. Still Flora felt she didn't want to reveal anything until she was a little surer of her own position. When she knew better where she stood she would know what she could confide to Clara. Meanwhile, if there was any one to whom she could turn now it would surely be Harry.

Yet, if she did, what a lot of awkward explanations! She could not return the sapphire

without giving a reason, and what a thing to explain—that she had not only worn it, but, in a freak, shown it to the one of all people he most objected to.

Nevertheless the most sensible thing clearly was to go through with it and confess to Harry. Then she must communicate with him at once. No—she would wait until after breakfast. There was plenty of time. Kerr would not come until the afternoon. But after breakfast, she wondered if it wouldn't be as well to ring him up at luncheon time? Then she would be sure of finding him at the club.

Meanwhile she dared not let the sapphire out of her grasp; and yet she could not wear it on her hand. She had thought of the tear-shaped pouch of gold which it was her custom to wear; but the slender length of chain that linked it to her neck was too frail for such a precious weight. At last she had fastened it around her neck on the strongest chain she owned, and thus she carried it all the morning under her bodice with a quieter mind than had been hers on the first day

she had worn it, when there had been nothing to explain her uneasiness.

She was quite sure she was going to give back the sapphire to Harry, yet she couldn't help picturing to herself what her meeting with Kerr would have been, supposing she had decided differently. As the morning slipped by she found herself doubting that he would come at all. Her attitude of the night before had surely been enough to discourage any one. Yet if he didn't come she knew that she would be disappointed.

She was alone at luncheon, and in a dream. She glanced now and then at the clock. She rose only ten minutes before the hour that Harry was in the habit of leaving the club. She went upstairs slowly and stopped in front of the telephone. She touched the receiver, drew her hand back and turned away. She shut the door of her own rooms smartly after her.

She did not try to—because she couldn't—understand her own proceeding. She merely sat, listening, as it seemed to her, for hours.

But when at last Kerr's card was handed in

to her, it gave her a shock, as if something which couldn't happen, and yet which she had all along expected, had come to pass.

In her instant of indecision Marrika had got away from her, but she called the girl back from the door and told her to say to Mrs. Britton that Mr. Kerr had called, but that Miss Gilsey would see him herself.

She started with a rush. Half-way down the stairs she stopped, horrified to find what her fingers were doing. They were closed around the little lump that the ring made in the bosom of her gown, and she had not known it. What if she had rushed in to Kerr with this extraordinary manifestation? What if, while she was talking to him, her hand should continue to creep up again and yet again to that place, and close around the jewel, and make it evident, even in its hiding-place? The time had come when she must even hide it from herself. And yet, to creep back up the stair when she made sure Kerr must have heard her tumultuous downward rush! It would never do to soundlessly retreat. She must

go back boldly, as if she had forgotten nothing more considerable than a pocket handkerchief.

Yet before she reached the top again she found herself going tiptoe, as if she were on an expedition so secret that her own ears should not hear her footsteps. But she went direct and unhesitating. It had come to her all in a flash where she would put the sapphire. The little buttoned pocket of her bath-robe. There it hung in the bath-room on one unvarying peg, the most immovable of all her garments, safe from the excursions of Marrika's needle or brushes, not to be disturbed for hours to come.

She passed through her bedroom, through her dressing-room into the bath-room. The robe was hanging behind the door. It took her a moment to draw out the ring and disentangle its chain, and while she was doing this she became aware of movings to and fro in her bedroom. She drew the door half open, the better to conceal herself behind it, and at the same time, through the widened crack of the jamb, to keep an eye on the dressing-room, and hurried lest

Marrika should surprise her. But nevertheless she had barely slipped the ring into the little pocket and refastened the flap, when Clara opened the bedroom door and stood looking into the dressing-room.

Flora experienced a sharp start of surprise, and then of wonder. Here was Clara again seeking her out! Here she stood, brushed and polished, and finished to a pitch of virtue, again taking Flora at a disadvantage, hiding behind her own door. But at the least she was grateful that Clara had not seen her. She stood a minute collecting herself. She wasn't doing anything she need be ashamed of, or that she need explain, or that need even awaken suspicion. But before she could take her courage in both hands and come out of her retreat, Clara had reached the middle of the dressing-room, and stood still.

Her lifted veil made a fine mist above the luster of her eyes. She was perfect to the tips of her immaculate white gloves, and she wore the simple, sober look of a person who thinks himself alone. Then it wasn't Flora, Clara was

looking for! She was looking all around—over the surface of every object in the room. Presently she went up to the dressing-table. She laid her gloved hands upon it, and looked at the small objects strewn over its top. She took a step backward and opened the top drawer. She reached into it, and delicately explored.

Flora could see the white gloves going to and fro among her white handkerchiefs, could see them find, open and examine the contents of her jewel-box. And the only thing that kept her from shrieking out was the feeling that this abominable thing which was being enacted before her eyes couldn't be a fact at all.

Clara took out an old pocket-book, shiny with years, shook from it a shower of receipts, newspaper clippings, verses. She let them lie. She took out a long violet box with a perfumer's seal upon it. It held a bunch of dried violets. She took out a bonbonnière of gold filigree. It was empty. A powder box, a glove box, a froth of lace, a handful of jewelers' boxes, a jewel flung loose into the drawer. This she pounced upon.

It was a brooch! She let it fall—turned to the chiffonier; upended the two vases of Venetian glass, lifted the lids of jars and boxes, finally came to the drawers. One by one she took them out, turned the contents of each rapidly over, and left them standing, gaping white ruffles and lace upon the floor. She took up daintily, in her white kid fingers, slippers, shook them upside down. She opened the door of the closet, and disappeared within. There was audible the flutterings of all the distressed garments, with little busy pauses. Then Clara came out, with her hat a little crooked; and stood in the middle of the room still with her absorbed and sober face, looking over the gaping drawers, pulled out and rifled, with their contents heaped up and streaming over the floor.

Her eye fell upon the waste basket. She turned it upside down, and stooped over the litter. She gathered it up in her white gloves and dropped it back. Then, for the first time, she glanced at the bath-room door; stood looking at it, as if it had occurred to her to look in the

soap dish. Then she turned again to the room, to the dressing-table. She put back the pasteboard jewelers' boxes, the jeweled pin, the laces, which she shook out and folded daintily, the glove and powder boxes, the gold bonbonnière, the long violet box, the leather pocket-book,—each deftly and unhesitatingly in the place from which she had taken it, and all the heaps of white handkerchiefs.

One by one she laid back in the chiffonier drawers, the garments, properly and neatly folded, that she had so hastily snatched out of them. The sun, streaming full into the room, caught gleams in her pale hair, and struck blindingly upon the heaps of white around her, and made two dazzling points of her gloved hands that moved as deftly as hands uncovered. She slid back the last drawer into the chiffonier, and rose from her knees, lightly dusting off the front of her gown; went to the closet door and closed it. She stood before it a moment with a face perplexed and thoughtful, then turned alertly toward the outer door. As she passed the

mirror she looked into it, and touched her hat straight again, but the action was subconscious. Clara wasn't thinking of it.

Flora stood as if she were afraid to move, while Clara crossed her bedroom, stopped, went on and closed the outer door behind her. And even after that soft little concussion she stood still, burning, choking, struggling with the overwhelming force of an affront whose import she did not yet realize. Out in her sunny dressing-room all the outraged furniture stood meek and in order, frauding the eye to believe that nothing had happened! She felt she couldn't look things in the face a moment longer. She hid her face in the folds of her dressing-gown.

Why, she had thought that such things couldn't happen! She had thought that people's private belongings, like their persons, were inviolable. They all always talked, she had talked, about such things as if they were mere nothings. They had talked about the very taking of the Crew Idol as if it were a splendid joke! But she had not dreamed what such things were like

when they were near. When they were held up to you naked they were like this! In the shame of it she could no more have faced Clara than if she had surprised Clara naked.

She snatched the ring out of the pocket of her gown and clutched it in her hand. Was there no place in the world where she could be sure of safety for this?

With trembling fingers she fastened it again to the chain about her neck. She thought of Kerr down-stairs waiting for her. Well, she would rather keep it with her. Then, at least, she would know when it was taken from her. Still in the fury of her outraged faith, she passed through her violated rooms, and slowly along the hall and down the stairs.

XI

THE MYSTERY TAKES HUMAN FORM

HE turned from the window where he had presented a long, drooping, patient back, and his warm, ironic mirth —the same that had played with her the first night—flashed out at sight of her. But after a moment another expression mixed with it, sharpened it, and fastened upon her with an incredulous intentness.

She stood on the threshold, pale, and brilliant still in her blaze of anger, equal, at last, to anything. Kerr, as he signaled to her with every lineament of his enlivened face, his interest, his defiance, his uncontrollability, was not the man of her imaginary conversations. He was not here to be used and disposed of; but, as he came

toward her, the new admiration in his face was bringing her reassurance that neither was she. The thought that her moment of bitter incredulity had made her formidable gave her courage to fight even him, of whom she was so much in awe; gave her courage even to smile, though she grew hot at the first words he spoke.

"You should not be brave and then run away, you know."

She thought of her rush up the stairs again. "I had to go back to see Mrs. Britton." (Oh, how she had seen her!)

It seemed to Flora that everything she had been through in the last few moments was blazoned on her face. But he only looked a little more gravely at her, though his sardonic eyebrow twitched.

"Ah, I thought you only ran back to hide in your doll's house."

She laughed. Such a picture of her!

"Well, at any rate, now I've come out, what have you to say to me?"

"Now you've come out," he repeated, and

looked at her this time with full gravity, as if he realized finally how far she'd come.

She had taken the chair in the light of the eastern windows. She lay back in the cushions, her head a little bent, her hands interlaced with a perfect imitation of quietude. The dull satin of her slender foot was the only motion about her, but the long, slow rise and fall of her breath was just too deep-drawn for repose.

He looked down upon her from his height.

"I'm sorry I frightened you last night," he said, "but I'm not sorry I came, since you've seen me. You needn't have, you know, if you didn't want to. You could have stayed in the doll's house; and there, I suppose, you think I should never have found you—or *it* again?"

He was silent a moment, leaning on the chair opposite, watching her with knitted forehead, while her apprehension fluttered for what he should do next. He had done away with all the amenities of meeting and attacked his point with a directness that took her breath.

"You know what I've come for," he said, "but

now I'm here, now that I see you, I wonder if there's something I haven't reckoned on." He looked at her earnestly. "If you think I've taken advantage of you—if you say so—I'll go away, and give you a chance to think it over."

It would have been so easy to have nodded him out, but instead she half put out her hand toward him. "No; stay."

He gave her a quick look—surprise and approbation at her courage. He dropped into a chair. "Then tell me about it."

Flora's heart went quick and little. She held herself very still, afraid in her intense consciousness lest her slightest movement might betray her. She only moved her eyes to look up at him questioningly, suspending acknowledgment of what he meant until he should further commit himself.

"I mean the sapphire," he said. He waited.

"Yes," she answered coolly. "I saw that it interested you last night, but I couldn't think especially why. It's a beautiful stone."

He laughed without a sound—shook noise-

lessly for a minute. "Meaning that a gentleman shouldn't pounce upon any beautiful stone he may happen to see?" He got up and moved about restlessly in the little space between their two chairs. "Quite so; lay it to my being more than a gentleman; lay it to my being a crack-brained enthusiast, a confounded beauty worshiper, a vicious curio dealer, an ill-mannered ass! But"—and he flashed around at her with a snap of his nervous fingers—"where did you get it?"

For the life of her she couldn't help her wave of color, but through it all she clung to her festal smile. Sheer nervousness made it easy.

"Well, suppose it was begged, borrowed, or—given to me? Suppose it came from here or far away yonder? What's that to do with its beauty?" She gave him question for question. "Did you ever see it before?"

He never left off looking at her, looking at her with a hard inquiry, as if she were some simple puzzle that he unaccountably failed to solve.

"That's rather neat, the way you dodge me," he said, dodging in his turn. "But I don't see it *now*. You're not wearing it?"

She played indifference with what a beating heart! "Oh, I only wear it off and on."

"Off and on!" His voice suddenly rang at her. "Off and on! Why, my good woman, it's just two days you could have worn it at all!"

She stood up—stood facing him. For a moment she knew nothing except that her horrible idea was a fact. She had the eye of the Crew Idol, and this man knew it! Yet the fact declared gave her courage. She could face his accusal if only he could give the reason for it. But after a moment, while they looked silently at each other, she saw he was not accusing her. He was threatening her and beseeching her indulgence in the same look. He opened his lips, hesitated, turned sharp about and walked away from her.

She watched him with increasing doubt. After saying so much, was he going to say nothing more? She had a feeling that she had not heard

the worst yet, and when he turned back to her from the other end of the room there was something so haggard, so harassed, so fairly guilty about him that if she had ever thought of telling him the truth of how she came by the ring she put it away from her now.

But beneath his distress she recognized a desperate earnestness. There was something he wanted at any cost, but he was going to be gentle with her. She had felt before the potentiality of his gentleness, and she doubted her power to resist it. She fanned up all the flame of anger that had swept her into the room. She reminded herself that the greatest gentleness might only be a blind; that there was nothing stronger than wanting something very much, and that the protection of the jewel was very thin. But when he stood beside her she realized he held a stronger weapon against her than his gentleness, something apart from his intention. She felt that in whatever circumstance, at whatever time she should meet him he would make her feel thus—hot and cold, and happy for the

mere presence of his body beside her. In a confusion she heard what he was saying.

He was speaking, almost coaxingly, as if to a child. "I understand," he was saying. "I know all about it. It's a mistake. But surely you don't expect to keep it now. It will only be an annoyance to you."

She turned on him. "What could it be to you?"

Kerr, planted before her, with his head dropped, looked, looked, looked, as if he gave silence leave to answer for him what it would. It answered with a hundred echoes ringing up to her from long corridors of conjecture, half-articulated words breathing of how extraordinary the answer must be that he did not dare to make. He looked her up and down carefully, impersonally, with that air he had of regarding a rare specimen, thoughtfully; as if he weighed such ephemeral substance as chance.

"What will you take for it?" he said at last.

She was silent. With a sick distrust it came

to her that it was the very worst thing he could have said after that speaking silence.

She stepped away from him. "This thing is not for sale."

He stared at her with amazement; then threw back his head and laughed as if something had amused him above all tragedy.

"You are an extraordinary creature," he said, "but really I must have it. I can't explain the why of it; only give the sapphire to me, and you'll never be sorry for having done that for me. Whatever happens, you may be sure I won't talk. Even if the thing comes out, you shan't be mixed up in it." He had come near her again, and the point of his long forefinger rested on her arm. She was motionless, overwhelmed with pure terror, with despair. He was smiling, but there was a desperate something about him, stronger than the common desire of possession, terrifying in its intensity. She looked behind her. The thick glass of the window was there, a glimpse of the empty street and the figure of a

woman in a blowing green veil turning the corner.

"Why not give it to me now," he urged, "since, of course, you can't keep it? I could have it now in spite of you."

Everything in her sprang up in antagonism to meet him. "I know what you are," she cried, "but you shan't have it. You have no more right to it than I. You can't get it away from me, and I shan't give it to you."

He had grown suddenly paler; his eyes were dancing, fastened upon her breast. His long hands closed and opened. She looked down, arrested at the sight of her hand clenched just where her breath was shortest, over the sapphire's hiding-place.

He smiled. How easily she had betrayed herself! But she abated not a jot of her defiance, challenging him, now he knew its hiding-place, to take the sapphire if he could. But he did not move. And it came to her then that she had been ridiculous to think for an instant that this man would take anything from her by

force. What she had to fear was his will at work upon hers, his persuasion, his ingenuity. She thought of the purple irises, and how he had drawn them toward him in the crook of his cane—and her dread was lest he meant to overcome her with some subtlety she could not combat. For that he was secret, that he was daring, that he was fearless beyond belief, he showed her all too plainly, since here he stood, condemned by his own evidence, alone, in the midst of her household, within call of her servants, and had the sublime effrontery to look at her with admiration, and, it occurred to her, even with a little pity.

The click of a moving latch brought his eyes from hers to the door.

"Some one is coming in," he said in a guarded voice. It warned her that her face showed too much, but she could not hope to recover her composure. She hardly wanted to. She was in a state to fancy that a secret could be kept by main force; and she turned without abatement of her reckless mood and took her hand from

where she had held it clenched upon her breast and stretched it out to Mrs. Herrick.

The lady had stood in the doorway a moment—a long-featured, whitish, modeled face, draped in a dull green veil, a tall figure whose flowing skirts of black melted away into the background of the hall—before she came forward and met her hostess' hand with a clasp firm and ready.

"I'm so glad to find you here," she said. She looked directly into Flora's eyes, into the very center of her agitation. She held her tremulous hand as if neither of these manifestations surprised her; as if a young woman and a young man in colloquy might often be found in such a state of mind.

Flora's first emotion was a guilty relief that, after all, her face had not betrayed Kerr. But she had no sooner murmured his name to Mrs. Herrick, no sooner had that lady's gray eyes lighted upon him, than they altered their clear confidence. The situation as reflected in Flora looked naïve enough, but there was nothing

naïve about Kerr. The very perfection of his coolness, there in the face of her burning agitation, was appalling. Oh, why couldn't he see, Flora thought wildly, how it was damning him —how it was showing him so practised, so marvelously equal to any emergency, that his presence here among fleeces could be nothing less than wolfish?

Mrs. Herrick's face was taking on an expression no less than wary. What he was, Mrs. Herrick could not dream. She could not even suspect what Flora believed. But in the light of her terrible discovery Flora dared not have him suspected at all. The chasms of distrust and suspicion that had been opening between them she forgot. In a flash she was ready to throw herself in front of this man, to cover him from suspicion, even though by so doing she took it upon herself.

Now, if she had ever in her life, she talked over the top of her feelings; and though at first to her ears her voice rang out horribly alone, presently Mrs. Herrick was helping her,

adding words to words. It was the house they spoke of, the San Mateo house, the subject about which Flora knew Mrs. Herrick had come to talk; but to Flora it was no longer a subject. It was a barrier, a shield. In this emergency it was the only subject large enough to fill the gap, and much as Flora had liked the idea of it, she had never built the house so large, so vivid, so wonderfully towering to please her fancy as she was doing now to cover Kerr. With questions she led Mrs. Herrick on to spin out the subject, to play it over with lights and shades, to beat all around it. And all the while she knew that Kerr was watching her; watching her once again in dubious admiration. It was a look that made Mrs. Herrick seem ready at a movement of his to lay her hand on Flora in protection.

The lady's clear gray eyes traveled between Flora's face and his. Under their steady light there was a strange alertness, as if she sat there ready enough to avert whatever threatened, but anxious to draw her skirts aside from it, dis-

trusting the quality, hating to have come in upon anything so dubious. When the hall door opened and closed she listened as if for a deliverer; and when Clara appeared between the portières she turned to her and met her with a flash of relief, as if here at last was a safe quantity. Clara was still wearing her hat, with the veil pushed up in a little mist above her eyes, and still had her white gloves on. The sight of Mrs. Herrick's hand soliciting the clasp of those gave Flora a curious sensation.

She looked from one face to another, and last at Kerr's. She shut her eyes an instant. Here was a thief. He was standing in her drawing-room now. She had been talking with him. She opened her eyes. The fact acknowledged had not altered the color of daylight. It was strange that things—furniture and walls and landscape—should remain so stolidly the same when such a thing had happened to her! For she had not only spoken with a thief, but she had shielded him. It struck her grotesquely that perhaps Mrs. Herrick's instinct was right,

after all. Wasn't Clara the safest of the lot? Clara at least kept her gloves on, while she herself was shamelessly arrayed on the side of disorder. She was clinging to a piece of property that wasn't hers, and whatever way she dressed her motives they looked too much of a piece with the operations of the original miscreant.

Flora saw the evil spirit of tragic-comedy. He fairly grinned at her.

XII

DISENCHANTMENT

THEN this was the end of all romance? She must turn her back on the charm, the power, the spell that had been wrought around her, and, horror-struck, pry into her own mind to discover what lawless thing could be in her to have drawn her to such a person, and to keep her, even now that she knew the worst, unwilling to relinquish the thought of him. His depravity loomed to her enormous; but was that all there was to be said of him? Did his delicacy, his insight, his tempered fineness, count for nothing beside it? Must their talks, their walking through the trees, the very memory of his voice, be lost inspiration?

She couldn't believe that this one spot could

make him rotten throughout. Her mind ran back into the past. She could not recall a word, an action, or a glance of his that had shown the color of decay. He had not even been insincere with her. He had come out with his convictions so flatly that when she thought of it his nonchalance appalled her. He had been the same then that he was now. But the thing that was natural for him was impossible for her, and she had found it out—that was all.

Yet the mere consideration of him and his obsession as one thing was intolerable. She curiously separated his act from himself. She thought of it, not as a part of him, but as something that had invaded him—a disease —something inimical to himself and others, that mixed the thought of him with terrors, and filled her way with difficulties. Now it was no longer a question of how to meet him, but of how she was not to. It was not his strength she feared, but her own weakness where he was concerned. Her tendency to shield him—she must guard against that—and that disturbing

influence he exercised over her, too evidently without intention. But he would be hard to avoid. This way and that she looked for a way out of her danger, yet all the while she was conscious that there was but one plain way of escape open to her. She could give the sapphire back to Harry within the twenty-four hours.

XIII

THRUST AND PARRY

My Dear Flora—I am going out early and shall not be back to dinner. Clara.

Flora let the little note fall as if she disliked the touch of it. She was relieved to think she would not have to see Clara that day. It was her desire never to see Clara again. If only they could part here and now! How she wanted to shake the whole thing off her shoulders! How foolish not to have gone to Harry when she had first made up her mind to! For why, after all, make him any explanations? Suppose she should just take the ring to him and say: "It gives me the shivers, Harry. Let's take it back and get something else." If he didn't suspect the sapphire already, he would never suspect it

from that. The worst he could do would be to laugh, to tease, to tell her she could not live up to her own romantic notions, since, after all, she had weakened and was wanting the usual thing.

But there had been times when she had thought that he did suspect the sapphire. Well, if he did, giving it back to him would practically be giving it back into public custody in the most decorous manner for a properly bred young woman. And how beautifully it would extricate her from her wretched situation! Logically, there was no fault to be found with such a course. It was eminently sane and safe. Yet it still appeared to her as if she were acting a coward's part. She was neither frankly giving the jewel to the authorities with the proper information, nor frankly handing it over to Kerr. But she was trying to slip it back into the questionable nook from which it had been taken, and she grew hot at the thought of how Kerr would despise her if he knew the craven course she was meditating. She seemed to hear

him saying, "I had thought braver things of you."

Of course, that was his way of expecting that she would give him the ring. And she felt a sort of rage against him that he should want that, and only that, so very much. Yet she didn't know what else she wanted him to want. Every time she thought of Kerr she found herself growing unreasonable; and she had to whip up her resolution with the hard facts of the case to prevent herself from drifting over on to his side completely.

But did she really want Harry to rid her of the ring? She would get hold of him first and then she would see what she would do.

She stepped into the hall with all the confidence of one who has fully made up her mind to carry matters with a high hand; but at the telephone she hesitated. Calling him up at such an hour of the morning demanding his attendance on such a fanciful errand—wouldn't he think it odd? No, he would think it the most natural thing in the world for her to be so

flighty. Reassured, she gave the club number and stood waiting, listening to the half-syllables of switched-off voices and the crossing click, click, that was bringing her fate nearer to her. She heard some one coming up the stairs and down the hall toward her. Marrika stood stolid at her elbow.

"Mr. Cressy," she pronounced.

"Yes, yes," said Flora, with the club clamoring in her left ear.

"He is down-stairs," said Marrika.

Flora nearly let the receiver fall. Harry here? What a piece of luck! But here on his own account, at such an hour—how extraordinary!

"Hello, hello," persisted the club. "What's wanted?"

"Why, I—" Flora stammered. "It's a mistake; never mind. I don't want him now." She hoped that Harry had not heard her as he came in, since it was his informal fashion to await her in the large entrance hall. She didn't want to spoil the chance he had given her of

seeming offhand about the ring. But the hall was empty, and as she descended the stairs she amused herself with the fancy that Shima had had a vision, and that she would still have to ring up the club and explain to the attendant that, after all, she wanted Mr. Cressy.

Then from the drawing-room threshold she caught sight of Harry standing in the big bay window of the drawing-room, in the same spot where Kerr had awaited her the afternoon before. Harry was tall and large and freshly colored, and yet he did not fill the room to her as the other man had done. He met her, kissed her, and she turned her head so that his lips met her cheek close beside her ear. She did not positively object to his kissing her on the lips, but her instinct was strong to offer him her cheek. He had sometimes laughed at this, but now he resented it. He insisted on his privilege, and she was passive to him, conscious of less love in this than assertion of possession.

"You are not going to Burlingame, are you?" she asked him with her first breath.

He looked down at her with a flushed and sulky air. "What difference would that make to you? I am, as it happens, but I suppose you think that's no reason for disturbing you so early." He was angry, but at what, she wondered, with creeping uneasiness. He held her and caressed her with a morose satisfaction, as if he had to make sure to himself that she was really his, and she permitted it and abetted it with a guile that astonished her.

"What is the matter?" she urged. "Are things going crookedly at Burlingame?"

"Things are going as crooked as you please, but not at Burlingame. Sit over there," he said, nodding toward the window-bench; "I want to talk to you."

Harry had the air of one about to scold, and certainly Flora thought if anybody was carrying matters with a high hand, it wasn't herself; but she didn't follow his direction. She continued to stand, while he, sitting on the table's edge, drumming the top of his hat, gloomily regarded her.

"Well?" she persisted, troubled by this look of his, and this silence.

"Look here," he began, "I have to be away a couple of days and I wish you'd do me a favor."

Flora's thought flew to the ring. Was he going to ask for it back, to have it reset, as he had promised on the threshold of the goldsmith's shop? Here might be the chance she had hoped for of getting rid of it. She grasped at it before she had time to waver.

"I wonder if it's the very favor I was going to ask of you."

But he didn't take it up. He seemed hardly to hear her, as if his mind was too much absorbed with quite another question—a question that the next moment came out flat. "What was that Kerr doing here yesterday?"

She was taken aback, so far had her apprehension of Harry's jealousy slipped into the background in the last twenty-four hours. But her consciousness that Harry was not behaving

well, even for a jealous man, made her take it up all the more lightly.

"Why, he was calling, chatting, taking tea —what anybody else would do from four to six. What in the world gave you the idea that he was doing anything extraordinary?"

"Well," he said, "you shouldn't do the sort of thing that makes you talked about."

" 'That makes me talked about'?" It made her pause in front of him.

"Why, yes, it isn't like you. It's never happened before. Look here. I drop into the Bullers' yesterday; find Clara sidled up to the judge; look around for you. 'Hello,' I say, 'where's Flora?' 'Oh,' says she, 'Flora's at home amusing Mr. Kerr.' 'Amusing Mr. Kerr!' " he repeated. "That's a nice thing to hear."

Flora went red. She walked down the room from him to give her suddenly tumultuous heart time. However little he might guess the real trend of her interview with Kerr, she couldn't hear him come near it without appre-

hension. She was angry, helplessly angry at Harry that he had taken this moment for his stupid jealousy. But she was more angry at Clara, since such a speech on Clara's part wasn't carelessness. She had meant it to work upon him, and here he stood, like the fine animal that he was, smoldering with the suspicion of encroachment on his prey.

She tried to laugh him out of it.

"Why, Harry, I never saw you jealous before!"

"It's all very well to say that—and you know I've never made a row about the other Johnnies. I knew you didn't care for any of *them*."

Her eyes narrowed and darkened.

"And you take it for granted I care for Mr. Kerr?"

"Oh, no, no!" He pushed his hand through his hair with an irascible gesture. "But it's plain enough you like him—you women always like a fellow that flourishes—but that's not the sort of man I care to see hanging around my girl."

Flora stood leaning on the table, breathing a little hurriedly, feeling rather as if she had been shaken. Harry, standing with his hands in his pockets, looked not unlike the threatening image he had appeared in the back of the goldsmith's shop.

"Of course, the fellow can talk," he admitted, "and he has a manner. But Lord knows where he comes from or who he is. Why, even the Bullers don't know."

Flora turned sharply on him. "Who told you that?"

"The judge. He picked him up at the club."

"Well," she kept it up, "some one had to introduce him there."

Harry smiled. "You wouldn't care to bow to some of those club members."

"Harry, do you know how you sound to me?" She was trembling at the daring of what she was going to say. "You talk as if you knew something against him."

Her statement seemed to bring him up short. "No, no, I don't," he said hastily.

She made a little gesture of despair. How was she to count on Harry if he was going to behave like this? How trust him when he was shuffling so?

She made one more bold stroke to make him speak out.

"Harry, you *do* know something about him! I know you have seen him before."

"Why, yes, I've seen him before. But that's got nothing to do with it."

He looked surprised that she should seem to accuse him of it, and she wondered if he could have forgotten how he had denied it before.

"And that isn't why you distrust him?"

The devil's tattoo that he beat on his hat stopped.

"I don't distrust him."

"Well, dislike him, then. When was it that you saw him before?"

"Isn't it enough for me to tell you that I don't want *you* to see him?"

"Oh!" She turned away from him. Every nerve in her was in revolt. Then he really

wasn't going to tell her anything. He was keeping her out of it as if she were a child. She had relied on him to return the ring. She had counted upon his indifference and good nature. And he was neither indifferent nor good-natured. All desire of even mentioning the ring to him left her; and as to giving him her confidence— These hints that he had thrown out about Kerr—they might be mere jealousy—but he might have actual knowledge, knowledge that, with her own fitted to it, would make for him a complete figure. She caught her breath at the thought of how near she had come to actually betraying Kerr. Until that moment she had not realized that through all her waverings her one fixed intention had been not to betray him.

Harry had risen and was buttoning his overcoat. "You know you're never at home if you don't want to be," he said.

She stood misleadingly drooping before him. But though her appearance was passive enough for the most exacting lover her will had never

been in more vigorous revolt. She knew Harry was taking her weariness for acquiescence, and she let him take it so. She even followed him into the hall, and with a vague idea of further propitiation, nodded away Shima and opened the door for him herself.

The fog was a chasm of white outside. Harry turned on the brink of it. "By the way, where's Clara?"

"Why, do you want to see her? She'll be out all day. She's dining with the Willie Herricks."

"No, I don't want to see her, but, by the way, she's not dining with the Willie Herricks; she's dining with the Bullers. I heard her make the engagement yesterday."

"Oh, no, Harry, I'm sure you're mistaken."

"Well, it doesn't matter. All I want to know is, why did you show that ring to Clara before it was set?"

She was genuinely aghast. "I didn't," she flashed. "What made you think I had?"

He shrugged. "Well, she asked me where

we got it. I don't see why women always talk those things over." He was looking at her inquiringly.

"Well, I haven't," she said quickly. "Have you?"

He looked out upon the fog. "Told her where we got it, do you mean? No, I just chaffed her. I'd look out, if I were you. She strikes me as damned curious." He stood a moment on the threshold, looking from Flora to the chasm of fog outside, as if he were choosing between two chances. "I think I'll take that ring this morning," he said slowly.

The deliberate words came to her with a shock. But in the moment, while she looked into Harry's moody face, she realized how impossible to make a scene over what must still be maintained as a trivial matter betwixt them—the mere resetting of a jewel; what should she do to put him off? She looked up at him, and saw with relief that his face was turned from her to the fog, as if he had forgotten her. Then, still with averted head, as if he addressed the

whiteness, or himself,—"No," he determined, "I won't. I'll take it when I come back." He pulled himself together with an effort, with a smile. "That is," he turned to her, "if you're in no great hurry about the setting? Very well, then. In a day or two."

He plunged away into the fog. A few rods from the door he disappeared, but she could still hear his footsteps growing thinner, lighter, passing away in the whiteness.

XIV

COMEDY CONVEYS A WARNING

SHE stood where he had left her in the open doorway, with the damp eddy of the fog blowing on her. She had had a narrow escape; but after the first fullness of her relief there returned upon her again the weight of her responsibility. There was no slipping out of it now, and it was going to be worse than she had imagined. So much had come out in the last half-hour that she felt bewildered by it. What Harry had let slip about Clara alarmed her. What in the world was Clara about? With one well-aimed observation she had stirred up Harry against Kerr and against Flora herself. And meanwhile she was running after the Bullers. Twice in two days, if Harry was not mistaken, and she was even nearing another engagement.

After all her fruitless mousings, Clara had too evidently got on the scent of something at last. How much she knew or guessed as yet, Flora could not be sure, but certainly, now, she couldn't let Clara go. For that would be turning adrift a dangerous person with a stronger motive than ever for pursuing her quest, and the opportunity for pursuing it unobserved, out of Flora's sight. Clara was at it even now, and the only consolation Flora had was that Harry, at least, would not play into her hands.

For Harry had a special secret interest of his own. The last ten minutes of their interview had made that plain. His manner, when he had declared his intention of taking the ring, had been anything but the manner of a care-free lover merely concerned with pleasing his lady. Then they were all of them racing each other for the same thing—the thing she held in her possession; and whether she feared most to be felled by a blow from Harry, or hunted far afield by Kerr, or trapped by Clara, she could not tell. She stood hesitating, looking out into the obscurity

of the fog, as if she hoped to read the answer there. Presently she returned to the fact that Shima was waiting to close the door. Half-way across the hall she paused again, looking thoughtfully down the rose-colored vista of the drawing-room, and up at the broad black march of the stair. Vague mysteries peered at her from every side. Which should she flee from? Which walk boldly up to and dispel?

She went up-stairs slowly. She stood in her dressing-room absently before the mirror. She touched the hard, unyielding stone of the ring under the thin bodice of her gown. She recalled the morning when she had gone to get it, before anything had happened and the lure of life had been so exquisite. Now that it had come near—if this indeed were life that she was laboring in—it was steep and crabbed, like the brown hills in summer, far off, like velvet, to climb, plowed ground and stubble.

And yet she didn't wish herself back, but only forward. Now she had no leisure to imagine, to pretend, to enjoy, only the breath-

less sense that she must get forward. The chattering clock on her mantel warned her of the passing time and set her hurrying into her walking-gown, her hat, her gloves, as if the object of her errand would only wait for her a moment longer. When, for the second time, she opened the house door, she didn't hesitate. She descended into the white fog that covered all the city.

Above her the stone façade of her house loomed huge and pinkish in the mist. Her spirits rose with the feeling that she was going adventuring again, leaving that house where for the last two days she had awaited events with such vivid apprehensions. She hurried fast down the damp, glistening pavement, seeing long, dim gray faces of houses glimmer by, seeing figures come toward her through the fog, grow vivid, pass, and hearing at intervals the hoarse, lonely voice of the fog-horn at "The Heads" reaching her over many intervening hills. She did not feel sure what she should do at the end of her journey or what awaited her there. She knew herself a most unpractised hunter, she,

who, all her life, had been the most artful of quarries. A quarry she was still, but in this chase she had to come out and stalk the facts in order to see which way to run; if, she told herself in her exhilaration, she decided to run at all.

She turned in at the low gate of imitation grill in front of an enormous wooden mansion, with towers and cupolas painted all a chill slate gray, with fuchsias, purple and red, clambering up the front. She rang, and was admitted into a hall, ornate and very high, with a wide staircase sweeping down into the middle of it.

The maid looked dubiously at Flora and thought Miss Buller was not at home, but would see. Flora turned into the room on her left and sat down among the Louis Quinze sofas and potted palms with a feeling that Miss Buller was at home, and, for one reason or another, preferred not to be seen. She waited apprehensively, wondering whether Ella was not seeing the world-in-general, or had really specified against herself. Could it be that Ella

was one of those women whom Harry had alluded to as running after Kerr? In the short twenty-four hours every individual help she had counted upon had seemed to draw away from her—Kerr, whose understanding she had been so sure of; Clara, whose propriety had never failed; Harry, whose comfortable good nature she had so taken for granted! It seemed as if the sapphire, whose presence she was never unconscious of, for all she wore it out of sight, had a power like the evil eye over these people. But if it could turn such as Ella against her, why, the Brussels carpet beneath her might well open and let her down to deeper abysses than Judge Buller's wine-cellar.

She started nervously at the step of the maid returning. The message brought was unexpected. "Miss Buller says will you please walk up-stairs?"

Flora was amazed. That invitation would have been odd enough at any time, for she and Ella were hardly on such intimate footing. But now she was ushered up the majestic stair, and

from the majestic upper hall abruptly into a wild little cluttered sewing-room, and thence into a wilder but more spacious bedroom, large curtains at the windows, large roses on the carpet, and over all objects in the room a clutter of miscellaneous articles, as if Ella's band-boxes, bureaus, and work-baskets habitually refused to contain themselves.

From the midst of this Ella confronted her, still in her "wrapper" and with the large puff of her hair a little awry. Under it her face was curiously pink, a color deepening to the tip of her nose and puffing out under her eyes.

"Well, Flora," she greeted her guest. "You were just the person I wanted to see. Sit down. No, not there—that's my bird of paradise feather! Oh, no, not there—that's the breakfast. Well, I guess you'll have to sit on the bed."

Flora swept aside the clothes that streamed across it and throned herself on the edge of the high, white plateau of Ella's four-poster. Ella, for all her eager greeting, looked upon her

friend doubtfully, and Flora recognized in herself a similar hesitation, as if each were trying to make out, without asking, what thoughts the other harbored.

"I was afraid I shouldn't see you at all," Flora began at last.

"Well, you wouldn't if it hadn't happened to be you," said Ella paradoxically. "Look at me; did you ever see such a sight?"

"You don't look very well," Flora cautiously admitted. "Why, Ella, you've been crying!"

"Yes, I've been crying," said Ella, mopping her nose, which still showed a tendency to distil a tear at its tip. "And it's perfectly awful to me to think you've been living so long in the same house with her."

Flora murmured breathlessly, "What in the world do you mean?"

"If you don't know, I certainly ought to tell you. I mean Clara," said Ella distinctly.

Flora, sitting up on the edge of the high bed with the tips of her little shoes hardly touching the floor, looked at Ella fascinated,

her lips a little apart. Ella had so exactly pronounced her own secret thought of Clara. She was breathless to know what had been Clara's performance at the Bullers'.

"Of course I've always known she was like that," said Ella, leaning back in her chair with an air of resignation. "She's always getting something. It's awful. It was the same even when we were at boarding-school. I suppose she never did have enough money, though her people were awfully nice; but she worked us all for invitations and rides in our carriages, and I remember she got lots through Lillie Lewis' elder brother, and he thought she was going to marry him, but she didn't. She married Lulu Britton's father; and I guess she worked him until he went under and they found there really was no money. So she's been living on people ever since." Ella rocked gloomily.

"But she does it so nicely," Flora suggested. She still had the feeling that it was not decent to own up to these most secret facts of people's failings.

"Oh, yes, she's a perfect wonder," Ella admitted grudgingly; "look at what she's done for you!" Ella's gesticulation was eloquent of how much that had been. "But don't you imagine she cares about you any more than she cares about me!" Ella began to cry again. "You were an awfully good thing for her, Flora, and now that you're going to be married she's got to have something else. But I do think she might have taken somebody besides papa."

Flora gasped. "'Taken!' Ella, what do you mean?"

"I mean married," said Ella.

"'Married!'" For the time Flora had become a helpless echo.

"Oh, not yet," Ella defiantly nodded. "Not while there's anything left of me."

Flora stammered. "Oh, Ella, no. Oh, Ella, are you sure?" She felt a hysterical impulse to giggle.

"Sure?" Miss Buller cried. "I should think

so! Why, she's simply making a dead set for him."

This dénouement, this climax to her somber expectations, struck Flora as something wildly and indecently ridiculous. "Why, but it's impossible!" she protested, and began helplessly to laugh.

"Well, I'd like to know why?" Ella snapped. "I'm sure papa is twice as rich as old Britton was, and twice as easy." She went off into sobs behind her handkerchief.

"Oh, don't, Ella, don't cry!" Flora begged, petting the large expanse of heaving shoulders. "I didn't mean anything. I was just silly. Of course it may be that she wants to marry him. But she never has before—at least, I mean, I don't believe she wants to now. What makes you think she does? What has she done?"

"Well," Ella burst out, "why is she coming here all the time, when she never used to, and petting papa? Why does she bother to be so agreeable to me when she never was before?

Why does she make me ask her to dinner, when I don't want to?"

Each question knocked on Flora's brain to the accompaniment of Ella's furious rocking. She could not answer them, and Ella's explanation, absurd as it seemed, coming on top of her high expectations, wasn't impossible. It was like Clara to have more than one iron in the fire; but when Flora remembered the passionate intentness with which Clara had demolished the order of her room, she couldn't believe that Clara would pause in the midst of such pursuit to pounce on Judge Buller.

"Oh, Ella," Flora sympathetically urged, "I don't believe there's really any danger. And surely, even if she meant it, Judge Buller wouldn't be—"

"Oh, yes, he would," Ella cut her short. "Why, when she came yesterday he was just going out, and she went for him and made him stop to tea. Think of it—papa stopping to tea! And he was as pleased as Punch to have her make up to him. He hasn't the least idea of

what she's after. Papa isn't used to ladies. He's always just lived with me."

This astonishing statement looking at Flora through Ella's unsuspecting eyes had nevertheless a pathos of its own. It conjured up a long vista of harmonious existence which the two, the daughter and the father, had made out of their mutual simplicity, and their mutual gusto for the material comforts which came comfortably.

"But I'll tell you one thing," Ella ended, still rocking vigorously; "if she comes here to-night to dinner when she knows I don't want her I shall tell her what I think of her, before she leaves this house! See if I don't."

"Don't do that, Ella," Flora entreated, "that would be awful." She was certain that such an interview would only end in Clara's making Ella more ridiculous than she was already. "Let me speak to her. I don't mind at all," she declared bravely, and in a manner truly, though she was fully aware that speaking to Clara would be anything but a treat.

"Oh, would you?" said Ella eagerly. "I

really would be awfully obliged. I hated to ask you, Flora, but I thought perhaps you might be able to—to, well, perhaps be able to do something," she ended vaguely. "Do you think you could?"

"I'll speak to Clara to-night," said Flora heroically, "or to-morrow," she added; "I'm afraid I won't see her to-night."

"Well, I'll let you know if it makes any difference," said Ella hopefully.

Flora knew that nothing either of them could say would make any difference to Clara, or turn her from the thing she was pursuing; but by speaking she might at least find out if Judge Buller himself were really her object. And Ella's wail of assured calamity, "Papa has always been so happy with me," touched her with its absurd pathos.

She kissed Ella's misty cheek at parting. It wasn't fair, she thought remorsefully, for people like the Bullers to be at large on the same planet with people like Clara—and herself—and—and like— Her thoughts ran off into the

fog. At least, thank heaven, it was the judge Clara was trailing and not Kerr.

The bells and whistles of one o'clock were making clangor as she ran up the steps of her house again. In the hall Shima presented her with a card. She looked at it with a quickening pulse. "Is he waiting?"

"No, madam. Mr. Kerr has gone. He waited half an hour."

Down went her spirits again. Yet surely after their last interview she ought not to be eager to meet him again. "In the morning," she thought, "and waited half an hour. How he must have wanted to see me!" She didn't know whether she liked that or not. "When did he come?"

"At eleven o'clock."

At this she was frightened; he had missed Harry by less than half an hour.

"He waited all that time alone?"

"No. Mr. Cressy came."

Flora felt a cold thrill in her nerves. Then Harry had come back! What had he come for?

"He also would wait," the Japanese explained.

Flora gasped. "They waited together!"

The Japanese shook his head. "They went away together."

She didn't believe her ears. "Mr. Kerr went away with Mr. Cressy?"

The Japanese seemed to revolve the problem of mastery. "No, Mr. Cressy accompanied Mr. Kerr." He had made a delicate oriental distinction. It put the whole thing before her in a moment. Harry had been the resistant, and the other with his brilliant initiative attacking, always attacking when he should have been hiding, had carried him off. "What had he done, and how had he managed, when Harry must have had such pressing reasons for wanting to stay?" Ah, she knew only too well Kerr's exquisite knowledge of managing; but why must he make such a reckless exposure of himself? Did he suppose Harry was to be managed? Had he no idea where Harry stood in this affair? In pity's name, didn't he know that

Harry had seen him before—had seen him under circumstances of which Harry wouldn't talk? They were circumstances of which she knew nothing, and yet from that very fact there was left a horrible impression in her mind that they had been of a questionable character.

XV

A LADY IN DISTRESS

SHE had returned, ready for pitched battle with Clara, and on the threshold there had met her the very turn in the affair that she had dreaded all along—the setting of Kerr and Harry upon each other.

These were two whom she had kept apart even in her mind—the man to whom she was pledged, with whom she had supposed herself in love, and the man for whom she was flying in the face of all her traditions. She had not scrutinized the reason of her extraordinary behavior; not since that dreadful day when the vanishing mystery had taken positive form in him had she dared to think how she felt about Kerr. She had only acted, acted; only asked herself what to do next, and never why; only taken his cause

upon herself and made it her own, as if that was her natural right. She could hardly believe that it was she who had let herself go to this extent. All her life she had been docile to public opinion, buxom to conventions, respectful of those legal and moral rules laid down by some rigid material spirit lurking in mankind. But now when the moment had come, when the responsibility had descended upon her, she found that these things had in no way persuaded her. They were not vital enough for her proposition. They had no meaning now—no more than proper parlor furniture for a castaway on a desert island.

Then this was herself, a creature too much concerned with the primal harmonies of life to be impressed by the modulations her decade set upon them. This was that self which she had obscurely cherished as no more real than a fairy; but at Kerr's acclamation it had proclaimed itself more real than flesh and blood, and Kerr himself the most real thing in all her life.

Then what was Harry? The bland implacable

pronouncement of Shima had summoned him up to stand beside Kerr more clearly than her own eyes could have shown him. Surely she was giving to Kerr what belonged to Harry, or else she had already given to Harry what ought to have been Kerr's. That was her last conclusion. It was horrible, it was hopeless, but it was not untrue. It had crept upon her so softly that it had taken her unawares. She was appalled at the unreason of passion. Unsought by him, unclaimed, in every common sense a stranger to him—how could she belong to him? And yet of that she was sure by the way he had unveiled her the first night, by the way he had quickened her dreaming into life. As many times as she had fancied what love was like she had never dreamed it could be like this. It was mockery that she could be concerned for one who only wanted of her—plunder. Yet it was so. She was as tremblingly concerned for his fate as if she owned his whole devotion; and his fate at this moment, she was convinced, was in Harry's hands.

Kerr, with his brilliant initiative, might carry him off, but Kerr was still the quarry. For had not Harry, from the very beginning, known something about him? Hadn't he at first denied having seen him before, and then admitted it? Hadn't he dropped hints and innuendoes without ever an explanation? She remembered the singular fact of the Embassy ball, twice mentioned, each time with that singular name of Farrell Wand. And to know—if that *was* what Harry knew—that a man of such fame was in a community where a ring of such fame had disappeared—what further proof was wanted?

Then why didn't Harry speak? And what was going on on his side of the affair? Harry's side would have been her side a few days before. Now, unaccountably, it was not. Nor was Kerr's side hers either. She was standing between the two—standing hesitating between her love of one and her loyalty to the other and what he represented. The power might be hers to tip the scales Harry held, either to Kerr's undoing, or to his protection. At least she

thought she might protect him, if she could discover Harry's secret. Her special, authorized relation to him—her right to see him often, question him freely—even cajole—should make that easy. But she shrank from what seemed like betrayal, even though she did not betray him to Kerr by name.

Then, on the other hand, she doubted how much she could do with Harry. She wasn't sure how far she was prepared to try him after that scene of theirs. She had no desire to pique him further by seeing too much of Kerr. On her own account she wanted for the present to avoid Kerr. He roused a feeling in her that she feared—a feeling intoxicating to the senses, dazzling to the mind, unknitting to the will. How could she tell, if they were left alone together for a long enough space of time, that she might not take the jewel from her neck, at his request, and hand it to him—and damn them both? If only she could escape seeing him altogether until she could find out what Harry was doing, and what she must do!

Meanwhile, there was her promise to Ella. She recalled it with difficulty. It seemed a vague thing in the light of her latest discovery, though she could never meet Clara in disagreement without a qualm. But she made the plunge that evening, before Clara left for the Bullers', while she was at her dressing-table in the half-disarray which brings out all the softness and the disarming physical charm of women. From her low chair Flora spoke laughingly of Ella's perturbation. Clara paused, with the powder puff in her hand, while she listened to Flora's explanation of how Ella feared that some one might, after all these years, be going to marry Judge Buller. Who this might be she did not even hint at. She left it ever so sketchy. But the little stare with which Clara met it, the amusement, the surprise, and then the shortest possible little laugh, were guarantee that Clara had seen it all. She had filled out Flora's sketch to the full outline, and pronounced it, as Flora had, an absurdity. But though Clara had laughed she had gone away with her delicate

brows a little drawn together, as if she'd really found more than a laugh, something worth considering, in Ella's state of mind.

Flora was left with the uneasy feeling that perhaps she had unwittingly delivered Ella into Clara's hands; that Ella, too, was in danger of becoming part of Clara's schemes. Danger seemed to be spreading like contagion. It was borne in upon her that from this time forward dangers would multiply. That nothing was going to be easier, but everything infinitely harder, to the end; and now was the time to act if ever she hoped to make way through the tangle.

She heard the wheels of Clara's departing conveyance. Now was her chance for an interview with Harry. She spent twenty minutes putting together three sentences that would not arouse his suspicions. She made two copies, and sent them by separate messengers, one to his rooms, one to the club, with orders they be brought back if he was not there to receive them. Then—the miserable business of

waiting in the large house full of echoes and the round ghostly globes of electric lights, with that thing around her neck for which—did they but know of it—half the town would break in her windows and doors.

The wind traveled the streets without, and shook the window-casings. She cowered over the library fire, listening. The leaping flames set her shadow dancing like a goblin. A bell rang, and the shadow and the flame gave a higher leap as if in welcome of what had arrived. She went to the library door. In the glooms and lights outside Shima was standing, and two messengers. It was odd that both should arrive at once. She stepped back and stood waiting with a quicker pulse. Shima entered with two letters upon his tray. She had a moment's anxiety lest both her notes had been brought back to her, but no—the envelope which lay on top showed Harry's writing. She tore it open hastily. Harry wrote that he would be delighted, and might he bring a friend with him; a bully fellow whom he wanted her to

meet? He added she might send over for some girl and they could have a jolly little party.

Flora looked at this communication blankly. Was Harry, who had always jumped at the chance of a tête-à-tête, dodging her? In her astonishment she let the other envelope fall. She stooped, and then for a moment remained thus, bent above it. The superscription was not hers. The note was not addressed to Harry, but to her, and in a handwriting she had never seen before!

Again the peal of the electric bell. Shima appeared with a third envelope. This time it was her own note returned to her. With the feeling she was bewitched she took up the mysterious letter from the floor and opened it. She read the strange handwriting:

> May I see you, anywhere, at any time, to-night?
>
> ROBERT KERR.

It was as if Kerr himself had entered the room, masked and muffled beyond recognition, and then, face to face with her, let fall his disguise. She gazed at the words, at the signa-

ture, thrilled and frightened. She looked at Harry's note, hesitated; caught a glimpse between the half-open doors of the two messengers waiting stolidly in the hall. Waiting for answers! Answers to such communications! She made a dash for the table where were pens and ink and on one sheet scrawled:

"Certainly. Bring him," appending her initials; on the other the word "Impossible," and her full name. Then she hurried the letters into Shima's hands, lest her courage should fail her —lest she should regret her choice.

"Anywhere, at any time, to-night," she repeated softly. Why, the man must be mad! Yet she permitted herself a moment of imagining what might have been if her answers had been reversed.

But no, she dared not meet Kerr's impetuous attacks yet. First she must get at Harry. And how was that to be managed if he insisted on surrounding himself with "a jolly little party?"

She found a moment that evening in which to ask him to walk out to the Presidio with her

the next morning. But he was going to Burlingame on the early train. He was woefully sorry. It was ages since he had had a moment with her alone, but at least he would see her that evening. She had not forgotten? They were going to that dinner—and then the reception afterward? Her suspicion that he was deliberately dodging wavered before his boyish, cheerful, unconscious face. And yet, following on the heels of his tendency to question and coerce her, this reticence was amazing. The next day would be lost with Harry beyond reach —twelve hours while Kerr was at the mercy of chance, and she was at the mercy of Kerr.

His tactics did not leave her breathing space. She felt as the lilies wavering just beyond his reach. She remembered his ingenuity. She thought of the blows of his cane. Lucky for her she was not rooted like the lilies! The only safety was in keeping beyond his reach.

Yet when his card was brought up to her the next morning she looked at the printed name as wistfully as if it had been his face. It cost

an effort to send down the cold fiction that she was not at home, and she could not deny herself the consolation of leaning on the baluster of the second landing, and listening for his step in the hall below. But there was no movement. Could it be possible he was waiting for her to come in? Hush! That was the drawing-room door. But instead of Kerr, Shima emerged. He was heading for the stair with his little silver tray and upon it—a note. Oh, impudence! How dared he give her the lie, by the hand of her own butler! She stood her ground, and Shima delivered the missive as if it were most usual to find one's mistress beflounced in peignoir and petticoats, hanging breathless over the baluster.

"Take that back," she said coldly, "and tell him that I am out; and, Shima,"—she addressed the man's intelligence—"make him understand it."

She watched the note departing. How she longed to call Shima back and open it! There was a pause—then Kerr emerged from the

drawing-room. As he crossed the hall he glanced up at the stair and as much as was visible of the landing. He hadn't taken Shima's word for it, after all!

The vestibule door closed noiselessly after him, the outer door shut with a heavy sound. Yet before that sound had ceased to vibrate, she heard it shut again. Was he coming back? There was a presence in the vestibule very vaguely seen through the glass and lace of the inner door. Her heart beat with apprehension. The door opened upon Clara.

Flora precipitately retreated. She was more disturbed than relieved by the unexpected appearance. For Clara must have seen Kerr leave the house. Three times now within three days he had been found with her or waiting for her. She wondered if Clara would ask her awkward questions. But Clara, when she entered Flora's dressing-room a few moments later with the shopping-list, instead of a question, offered a statement.

"I don't like that man," she announced.

"Who?"

"That Kerr. I met him just now on the steps. Don't you feel there is something wrong about him?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Flora vaguely.

Clara gave her a bright glance.

"But you weren't at home to him."

"I'm not at home to any one this morning," Flora answered evasively, feeling the probe of Clara's eyes. "I'm feeling ill. I'm not going out this evening either. I think I'll ring up Burlingame and tell Harry." It was in her mind that she might manage to make him stay with her while Clara went on to the reception.

"Burlingame! Harry!" Clara echoed in surprise. "Why, he's in town. I saw him just now as I was coming up."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He was walking up Clay from Kearney. I was in the car."

"Why that—that is—" Flora stammered in her surprise. "Then something must have kept him," she altered her sentence quickly. But

though this seemed the probable explanation she did not believe it. Harry walking toward Chinatown, when he had told her distinctly he would be in Burlingame! She thought of the goldsmith shop and there returned to her the memory of how Harry and the blue-eyed Chinaman had looked when she had turned from the window and seen them standing together in the back of the shop.

"You do look ill," Clara remarked. "Why don't you stay in bed, and not try to see any one?"

Flora murmured that that was her intention, but she was far from speaking the truth. She only waited to make sure of Clara's being in her own rooms to get out of the house and telephone to Harry.

It was not far to the nearest booth, a block or two down the cross-street. She rang, first, the office. The word came back promptly in his partner's voice. He had gone to Burlingame by the early train. It was the same at the club. He must be in town, then, on secret

business. She left the apothecary's and, with serious face, walked on down the street, away from her house. She was thinking that now she knew Harry had lied to her. And it was the second time. But perhaps it was just because he thought her innocent that he was keeping her so in the dark. Suppose she should tell him flatly what she had found out about him to-day?

She walked rapidly, in her excitement, turning the troubling question over in her mind. She did not realize how far she had gone until some girl she knew, passing and nodding to her, called her out of her reverie. She was almost in front of the University Club. A few blocks more and she would be in the shopping district. She hesitated, then decided that it would be better to walk a little further and take a cross-town car.

A group of men was leaving the club. Two lingered on the steps, the other coming quickly out. At sight of him, she averted her face, and, hurrying, turned the corner and walked down a

block. Her heart was beating rapidly. What if he had seen her! She looked about—there was no cab in sight—the best thing to do was to slip into one of the crowded shops, full of women, and wait until the danger had passed. Once inside the door of the nearest, she felt herself, with relief, only one of a horde of pricers, lookers and buyers. She felt as if she had lost her identity. She went to the nearest counter and asked for veils. Partly concealed behind the bulk of the woman next her, she kept her eye on the door. She saw Kerr come in. How absurd to think that she could escape him! She turned her back and waited a moment or two, still hoping he might pass her by. Then, she heard his voice behind her:

"Well, this is luck!"

She was conscious of giving him a limp hand. He sat down on the vacant stool next her, laughing.

"You are a most remarkably fast walker," he observed.

"I had to buy a veil," Flora murmured.

"Has it taken you all the morning?"

She could see she had not fooled him.

"I had a great many other things to do." She was resolved not to admit anything.

"No doubt, but I wanted to see you very much last night, and again this morning. I may see you this evening, perhaps?" He was grave now. She saw that he awaited her answer in anxiety.

"But—" she hesitated just a moment too long before she added, "I'm going out this evening."

She started nervously to rise.

"Wait," he said in a voice that was audible to the shop-girl, "your package has not come."

She looked at him helplessly, so attractive and so inimical to her. He swung around, back to the counter, and lowered his voice. "Did you know I called upon you yesterday morning, also?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Mr. Cressy and I waited for you together. Did he mention it to you?"

"No." Her lips let the word out slowly.

"That's a reticent friend of yours!" The exclamation, and the truth of it, put her on her guard.

"I can't discuss him with you," she said coldly.

"Yet no doubt you have discussed me with him?"

"Never!"

"You haven't told him anything?" The incredulity, the amazement of his face put before her, for the first time, how extraordinary her conduct must seem. What could he think of her? What construction would he put upon it? She blushed, neck to forehead, and her voice was scarcely audible as she answered "No."

But at that small word his whole mood warmed to her. "Why, then," he began eagerly, "if Cressy doesn't know—"

"Oh, but he—" Flora stopped in terror of herself. "I can't talk of him, I must not. Don't ask me!" she implored, "and please, please don't come to my house again!"

He gave his head a puzzled, impatient shake. "Then where *am* I to see you?"

"In a few days—perhaps to-morrow—I will let you know." She rose. She had her package now. She was getting back her courage. There was no further way of keeping her.

But he followed her closely through the crowd to the door. "Yes," he said quickly under his breath, "in a few days, perhaps to-morrow, as soon as you get rid of it, you won't mind meeting me! What are you afraid of? Surely not me?"

She was, but hotly denied it.

"I am not afraid of you. I am afraid of them!"

"Of them!" He peered at her. "What are you talking about now?"

Ah, she had said too much! She bit her lip. They had reached the corner, and the gliding cable car was approaching. She turned to him with a last appeal.

"Don't ask me anything! Don't come with me! Don't follow me!"

Not until she was safely inside the car did she dare look back at him. He was still on the corner, and he raised his hat and smiled so reassuringly that she was half-way home before she realized that, in spite of all she had urged upon him, he had not committed himself to any promise. And yet, she thought in dismay, he had almost made her give away Harry's confidence. She was seeing more and more clearly that this was the danger of meeting him. He always got something out of her and never, by chance, gave her anything in return. If he should seek her to-night she dared not be at home! Any place would be safer than her own house. It would be better to fulfil her engagement and go to the reception with Clara and Harry. That was a house Kerr did not know.

It was awkward to have to announce this sudden change of plan after her pretenses of the morning, but of late she had lived too constantly with danger for Clara's lifted eyebrows to daunt her. The mere trivial act of being dressed each day was fraught with danger. To

get the sapphire off her person before Marrika should appear; to put it back somehow after Marrika had done; to shift it from one place to another as she wore gowns cut high or low —and every moment in fear lest she be discovered in the act! This was her daily manœuver. To-night she clasped the chain around her waist beneath her petticoats. But Marrika's sensitive fingers, smoothing over, for the last time, the close-fitting front of the gown, felt the sapphire, fumbled with it, and tried to adjust it like a button.

"That is all right," Flora said quickly. "Nothing shows." Was it always to make itself known, she thought uneasily, no matter how it was hid?

She was ready early, in the hope that Harry might come, as he had been wont to do, a little before the appointed hour. But he turned up without a moment to spare. Clara was downstairs in her cloak when he appeared. There was no chance for a word at dinner. But if she could not manage it later in the wider field

of the reception, why, then she deserved to fail in everything.

But she found, upon their arrival that even this was going to be hard to bring about. For she was immediately pounced upon—first, by Ella Buller.

"Why, Flora," at the top of her voice, "where have you been all these days!" Then in a hot whisper, "Did you speak to her? It hasn't done one bit of good."

"I think you are mistaken," Flora murmured. "But be careful, and let me know—" She had only time for that broken sentence before she was surrounded; and other voices took up the chorus.

She was getting to be a perfect hermit.

She was forgetting all her old friends.

And a less kindly voice in the background added, "Yes, for new ones."

She realized with some alarm that though she had forgotten her public, it had kept its eye on her. She answered, laughing, that she was keeping Lent early, and allowed herself to

be drifted about through the crowd by more or less entertaining people, now and then getting glimpses of Harry, tracking him by his burnished brown head, waiting her opportunity to get him cornered. At last she saw him making for the smoking-room. Connecting this with the drawing-room where she stood was a small red lounging-room, walls, floor and furniture all covered with crimson velvet. It had a third door which communicated indirectly with the reception-rooms, by means of a little hall. She was near that hall, and it would be the work of a moment to slip by way of it into the red room and stop Harry on his way through. She had not played at such a game since, as a child, she had jumped out on people from dark closets, and Harry was as much astonished as she could remember they had been. He was cutting the end of a cigar and he all but dropped it.

"What in the world are you doing here alone?" He spoke peevishly. "I don't see how a crowd of men can leave such a bundle of fascination at large!"

She made him a low courtesy and said she was preventing him from doing so.

"It's very good of you, and you are very pretty, Flora," he admitted with a grudging smile, "but I've got to see a man in there." His eyes went to the door of the smoking-room whence was audible a discussion of voices, and among them Judge Buller's basso. She was between Harry and the door. Laughingly, he made as if to put her aside, when the door through which she had entered opened again sharply; and Kerr came in.

"Forgive me. I followed you," he began. Then he saw Harry. "I—ha—ha—I've been hunting for you, Cressy, all the evening!"

Harry accepted the statement with a cynical smile. It was too evidently not for him Kerr had been hunting, and after the first stammer of embarrassment, the Englishman made no attempt to conceal his real intentions. His words merely served him as an excuse not to retreat.

"This is a good place to sit," he said, push-

ing forward a chair for Flora. She sank into it, wondering weakly what daring or what danger had brought him into a house where he was not known, to seek her. He sat down in the compartment of a double settee near her. Harry still stood with a dubious smile on his face. The look the two men exchanged appeared to her a prolongment of their earnest interrogation in the picture gallery; but this time it struck her that both carried it off less well. Harry, especially, bore it badly.

"Did you say you were looking for me?" he remarked. "Well, Buller's been looking for *you*. He wants to know about some Englishman that they're trying to put up at the club."

"How's that? Oh, yes! I remember." Kerr shrugged. "Never heard of him at home, and can't vouch for every fellow who comes along, just because he is English."

"Quite so!" said Harry, with a straight look at Kerr that made Flora uncomfortable.

"But Judge Buller has already vouched for

that man," she said quickly, "so he must be all right."

Kerr inclined his head to her with a smile.

"Buller is easily taken in," said Harry calmly. Under the direct, the insolent meaning of his look Flora felt her face grow hot—her hands cold. Harry could sit there taunting this man, hitting him over another man's back, and Kerr could not resent it. He could only sit—his head a little canted forward—looking at Harry with the traces of a dry smile upon his lips.

She thought the next moment everything would be declared. She sprang up, and, with an impulse for rescue, went to the door of the smoking-room. "Judge Buller," she called.

There was a sudden cessation of talk; a movement of forms dimly seen in the thick blue element; and then through wreaths of smoke, the judge's face dawned upon her like a sun through fog.

"Well, well, Miss Flora," he wanted to know,

"to what bad action of mine do I owe this good fortune?"

She retreated, beckoning him to the middle of the room. "You owe it to the bad action of another," she said gaily. "Your friends are being slandered."

Harry made a movement as if he would have stopped her, and the expression of his face, in its alarm, was comic. But she paid no heed. She laid her hand on Harry's arm. "Mr. Kerr is just about to accuse us of being impostors," she announced. She had robbed the situation of its peril by gaily turning it exactly inside out.

The judge blinked, puzzled at this extraordinary statement. Harry was disconcerted; but Kerr showed an astonishment that amazed her—a concern that she could not understand. He stared at her. Then he laughed rather shakily as he turned to her with a mock gallant bow.

"All women impose upon us, madam. And as for Mr. Cressy"—he fixed Harry with a

look—"I could not accuse him of being an impostor since we have met in the sacred limits of of St. James'."

The two glances that crossed before Flora's watchful eyes were keen as thrust and parry of rapiers. Harry bowed stiffly.

"I believe, for a fact, we did *not* meet, but I think I saw you there once—at some Embassy ball."

The words rang, to Flora's ears, as if they had been shouted from the housetops. In the speaking pause that followed there was audible an unknown hortatory voice from the smoking-room.

"I tell you it's a damn-fool way to manage it! What's the good of twenty thousand dollars' reward?" Flora clutched nervously at the back of her chair. She seemed to see the danger of discovery piling up above Kerr like a mountain.

The judge chuckled. "You see what you saved me from. They've been at it hammer and

tongs all the evening. Every man in town has his idea on that subject."

"For instance, what is that one?" Kerr's casual voice was in contrast to his guarded eyes.

The judge looked pleased. "That one? Why, that's my own—was, at least, half an hour ago. You see, about that twenty-thousand-dollar proposition—" They moved nearer him. They stood, the four, around the red velvet-covered table, like people waiting to be served. "The trouble is right here," said the judge, emphasizing with blunt forefinger. "The crook has a pal. That's probable, isn't it?"

Harry nodded. Flora felt Kerr's eyes upon her, but she could not look at him.

"And we see the thing is at a deadlock, don't we? Well, now," the judge went on triumphantly, "we know if any one person had the whole ring it would be turned in by this time. That is the weak spot in the reward policy. They didn't reckon on the thing's being split."

"Split? No, really, do you think that pos-

sible?" Kerr inquired, and Flora caught a glimmer of irony in his voice.

"Well, can you see one of those chaps trusting the other with more than half of it?" The judge was scornful. "And a fellow needs a whole ring if he is after a reward." He rolled his head waggishly. "Oh, I could have been a crook myself!" he chuckled, but his was the only smiling face in the party.

For Kerr's was pale, schooled to a rigid self-control.

And Harry's was crimson and swollen, as if with a sudden rush of blood. His twitching hands, his sullen eyes, responded to Judge Buller's last word as if it had been an accusation.

"It makes me damned sick, the way you fellows talk—as if it was the easiest thing in the world to—" He broke off. It was such a tone, loose, harsh and uncontrolled, as made Flora shrink.

As if he sensed that movement in her, he turned upon her furiously.

"Well, are we going to stand here all night?" He took her by the arm.

She felt as if he had struck her. Buller was staring at him, but Kerr had opened the door through which she had entered, and now, turning his back upon Harry, silently motioned her out.

She had a moment's fear that Harry's grasp, even then, wouldn't let go. Indeed, for a moment he stood clutching her, as if, now that his rage had spent itself, she was the one thing he could hold to. Then she felt his fingers loosen. He stood there alone, looking, with his great bulk, and his great strength, and his abashed bewilderment, rather pathetic.

But that aspect reached her dimly, for the fear of him was uppermost. Her arm still burned where he had grasped it. She moved away from him toward the door Kerr had opened for her. She passed from the light of the crimson room into the dark of the passage. Some one followed her and closed the door.

Some one caught step with her. It was Kerr. He bent his dark head to speak low.

"I don't know why you did it, you quixotic child, but you must not expose yourself in this way, for any reason whatsoever."

The light of the crowded rooms burst upon them again.

"Oh," she turned to him beseechingly, "can't you get me away?"

"Surely." His manner was as if nothing had happened. His smile was reassuring. "I'll call your carriage, and find Mrs. Britton."

When Flora came down from the dressing-room she found Clara already in the carriage, and Kerr mounting guard in the hall. As he handed her in, Clara leaned forward.

"Where is Mr. Cressy?" she inquired.

"He sent his apologies," Kerr explained. "He is not able to get away just now."

Clara could not control a look of astonishment. As the carriage began to move and Kerr's face disappeared from the square of the window, she turned to Flora.

"Have you and Harry quarreled over that man?"

Flora's voice was low. "No. But Harry—Harry—" she stammered, hardly knowing how to put it, then put it most truly: "Harry is not quite himself to-night."

Flora lay back in the carriage. She was dimly aware of Clara's presence beside her, but for the moment Clara had ceased to be a factor. The shape that filled all the foreground of her thought was Harry. He loomed alarming to her imagination—all the more so since, for the moment, he had seemed to lose his grip. That was another thing she could not quite understand. That burst of violent irritation following, as it had, Judge Buller's words! If Kerr had been the speaker it would have been natural enough, since all through this interview Harry's evident antagonism had seemed strained to the snapping point.

But poor Judge Buller had been harmless enough. He had been merely theorizing. But—wait! She made so sharp a movement that Clara

looked at her. The judge's theory might be close to facts that Harry was cognizant of.

For herself she had had no way of finding out how the sapphire had got adrift. But hadn't Harry? Hadn't he followed up that singular scene with the blue-eyed Chinaman by other visits to the goldsmith's shop? Why, yesterday, when he was supposed to be in Burlingame, Clara had seen him in Chinatown. The idea burst upon her then. Harry was after the whole ring. He counted the part she held already his, and for the rest he was groping in Chinatown; he was trying to reach it through the imperturbable little goldsmith. But he had not reached it yet—and she could read his irritation at his failure in his violent outburst when Judge Buller so innocently flung the difficulties in his face. She knew as much now as she could bear. If Harry did not suspect Kerr, it would be strange. But—Harry waiting to make sure of a reward before he unmasked a thief! It was an ugly thought!

And would he wait for the rest now—now

that the situation was so galling to him? Might not he just decide to take the sapphire, and with the evidence of that, risk his putting his hand on the "Idol" when he grasped the thief?

The carriage was stopping. Clara was making ready to get out. She braced herself to face Clara, in the light, with a casual exterior—but when she had reached her own rooms she sank in a heap in the chair before her writing-table, and laid her head upon the table between her arms.

In her wretchedness she found herself turning to Kerr. How stoically he had endured it all, though it must have borne on him most heavily! How kind he had been to her! He had not even spoken of himself, though he must have known the shadows were closing over his head. Any moment he might be enshrouded. If it came to a choice between having him taken and giving him the blue jewel, she wondered which she would do.

In the gray hours of the morning she wrote him. She dared not put the perils into words,

but she implied them. She vaguely threatened; and she implored him to go, avoiding them all, herself more than any; and, quaking at the possibility that he might, after all, overcome *her*, she declared that before he went she would not see him again. She closed with the forbidding statement that whether he stayed or went, at the end of three days she would make a sure disposal of the ring. She put all this in reckless black and white and sent it by the hand of Shima. Then she waited. She waited, in her little isolation, with the sapphire always hung about her neck, waited with what anticipation of marvelous results—avowals, ideal farewells, or possibly some incredible transformation of the grim face of the business. And the answer was silence.

XVI

THE HEART OF THE DILEMMA

THERE is, in the heart of each gale of events, a storm center of quiet. It is the very deadlock of contending forces, in which the individual has space for breath and apprehension. Into this lull Flora fell panting from her last experience, more frightened by this false calm than by the whirlwind that had landed her there. Now she had time to mark the echoes of the storm about her, and to realize her position. Her absorption had peopled the world for her with four people at most. Now she had time to look at the larger aspect.

From the middle of her calm she saw many inexplicable appearances. She saw them everywhere, from the small round of Clara's movement to the larger wheel of the public aspect.

Clara was taking tea with the Bullers, and the papers had ceased to mention the Crew Idol.

It had not even been a nine days' wonder. It had not dwindled. It had simply dropped from head-lines to nothing; and after the first murmur of astonishment at this strange vanishing, after a little vain conjecture as to the reason of it, the subject dropped out of the public mouth. The silence was so sudden it was like a suppression. To Flora it shadowed some forces working so secretly, so surely, that they had extinguished the light of publicity. They must be going on with concentrated and terrible activity in cycles, which perhaps had not yet touched her.

So, seeing Major Purdie among the crowd at some one's "afternoon" where she was pouring tea, she looked up at his cheerful face and high bald dome with a passionate curiosity. He knew why the press had been extinguished, and what they were doing in the dark. She knew where the sapphire was—and where the culprit was to be found. And to think that they could tell each other, if they would, each a tale the other would

hardly dare believe. Amazing appearances! How far away, how foreign from the facts they covered! But Major Purdie had the best of it. He at least was doing his duty. He was standing stiffly on one side, while she hesitated between, trying desperately to push Kerr out of sight before she dared uncover the jewel. But he wouldn't move. In spite of all she had done, he wouldn't.

Across the room that very afternoon she caught the twinkle of his resisting smile. He had had her letter then for two days, and still he had come here, though he'd been bidden to stay away; though he had been warned to keep away from all places where she, or these people around her, might find him; though he had been implored to go, finally, as far away as the round surface of the world would let him.

By what he had heard and seen in the red room that night, he must know her warning had not been ridiculous. And there was another threat less apparent on the face of things, but evident enough to her. It was the change in

Clara after she had begun her attack on the Bullers, her appearance of being busy with something, absorbed with, intent upon, something, which, if she had not secured it yet, at least she had well in reach. And that thing—suppose it had to do with the Crew Idol; and suppose Clara should play into Harry's hands!

For Kerr's escape Flora had been holding the ring, fighting off events, and yet all the while she had not wanted to lose the sight of him. Well, now, when she had made up her mind finally to resign herself to the dreariness of that, might he not at least have done his part of it and decently disappeared? So much he might have done for her. Instead of smiling at her across crowded tea-rooms, and obliquely glancing at her down decorous dinner-tables, and with the same fatal facility he had displayed in getting at her, now keeping away from her, out of all possible reach.

He was playing her own trick on her, but her chances for getting at him again were fewer than his had been with her. She could not be-

siege him in his abode; and in the places where they met, large houses crowded with people, the eye of the world was upon her. For how long had she forgotten it—she who had been all her life so deferential toward it! Even now she remembered it only because it interfered with what she wanted to do.

For the eye of her small society was very keenly upon Kerr. She realized, all at once, that he had become a personage; and then, by smiles, by lifted eyebrows, by glances, she gathered that her name was being linked with his. She was astonished. How could their luncheon together at the Purdies', their words that night in the opera box, their few minutes' talk in the shop, have crystallized into this gossip? It vexed her —alarmed her, how it had got about when she had seen him so seldom, had known him scarcely more than a week. It was simply in the air. It was in her attitude and in his, but how far it had gone she did not dream, until in the dense crowd of some one's at-home she caught the words of a young girl. The voice was so sweet

and so prettily modulated that at its first notes Flora turned involuntarily to glimpse the speaker, a slender creature in a delicate mist of muslin, with an indeterminate chin and the cheek of a pale peach.

"Just think," Flora heard her saying, "he went to see her three times in two days, but to-day, did you notice, he wouldn't look at her until she went up and spoke to him. I don't see how a girl can! Harry Cressy—"

She moved away and the words were lost. Flora looked after her. For the moment she felt only scorn for the creatures who had clapped that interpretation upon her great responsibility. These people around her seemed poor indeed, absorbed only in petty considerations, and seeing everything down the narrow vista of the "correct." Her eyes followed the young girl's course through the room, easy to trace by her shining blond head, and the unusual deliciousness of her muslin gown. She stopped beside two women, and with a certain sense of pleasure and embarrassment Flora recognized one of them—

Mrs. Herrick. She caught the lady's eye and bowed. Mrs. Herrick smiled, with a gracious inclination in which her graceful shoulders had a part.

It gave Flora the sense Mrs. Herrick's presence always brought her, of protection, or security, and the possibility of friendship finer than she had ever known. She started forward. But Mrs. Herrick, presenting instantly her profile, drew the young girl's hand through her arm and moved away.

Flora winced as if she had received a blow. The other people who had heard the same gossip of her had been, on account of it, all the more amused, and anxious to talk to her. But Mrs. Herrick, though she bowed and smiled, did not want her too near her daughter; perhaps, herself, would have preferred not to speak to her.

She felt herself judged—judged from the outside, it is true—but still there was justice in it. She had been flying in the face of custom, ignoring common good behavior, in short, sticking to her own convictions in defiance of the

world's. And she must pay the penalty—the loss of the possibility of such a friend.

But it was hard, she thought, to pay the price without getting the thing she had paid for. It was more like a gamble in which she had staked all on a chance. And never had this chance appeared more improbable to her than now. For if Kerr valued the ring more than he valued his safety, what argument was left her? She thought—if only she had been a different sort of woman—the sort with whom men fall in love—ah, then she might have been able to make one further appeal to him—one that surely would not have failed.

XVII

THE DEMIGOD

ON the third day she opened her eyes to the sun with the thought: Where is he? From the windows of her room she could see the two pale points and the narrow way of water that led into the western ocean. Had he sailed out yonder west into the east, into that oblivion which was his only safety, for ever out of her sight? Or was he still at hand, ignoring warning, defying fate? "What difference can that make to me now?" she thought, "since whether he is here or yonder I've come to the end."

She drew out the sapphire and held it in her hand. The cloud of events had cast no film over its luster, but she looked at it now without pleasure. For all its beauty it wasn't worth what they

were doing for it. Well, to-day they were both of them to see the last of it. To-day she was going to take it to Mr. Purdie to deliver it into his hands, to tell him how it had fallen into hers in the goldsmith's shop—all of the story that was possible for her to tell. For the rest, how she came to fix suspicion on the jewel, he might think her fanciful or morbid. It didn't matter as long as the weary thing was out of her hands. It couldn't matter!

She had made it out all clear in her mind that this was the right thing to do. It hadn't occurred to her she had made it out only on the hypothesis of Kerr's certainly going. It had not occurred to her that she might have to make her great moral move in the dark; or, what was worse, in the face of his most gallant resistance. In this discouraging light she saw her intention dwindle to the vanishing point, but the great move was just as good as it had been before—just as solid, just as advisable. Being so very solid, wouldn't it wait until she had time to show him that she really meant what she said, sup-

posing she ever had a chance to see him again? The possibility that at this moment he might actually have gone had almost escaped her. She recalled it with a disagreeable shock, but, after all, that was the best she could hope, never to see him again! She ought to be grateful to be sure of that, and yet if she were, oh, never could she deprive him of so much beauty and light by her keeping of the sapphire as he would then have taken away from her!

She would come down then, indeed, level with plainest, palest, hardest things—people and facts. Her romance—she had seen it; she had had it in her hands, and it had somehow eluded her. It had vanished, evaporated. It had come to her in rather a terrific guise, presented to her on that night at the club by the first debonair wave of the man's hand; and now he might have gone out through that white way into the east, taking back her romance as the fairy takes back his unappreciated gift.

She leaned and looked through the thin veil of her curtains at the splendid day. It was one

of February's freaks. It was hot. The white ghost of noon lay over shore and sea. Beneath her the city seemed to sleep gray and glistening. The tops of hills that rose above the up-creeping houses were misted green. Across the bay, along the northern shore, there was a pale green coast of hills dividing blue and blue. Ships in the bay hung out white canvas drying, and the sky showed whiter clouds, slow-moving, like sails upon a languid sea. Beneath her, directly down, through hanging darts of eucalyptus leaves, hemmed with high hedges, the oval of her garden showed her a pattern like a Persian carpet. Roofs sloped beyond it, and beyond these the diagram of streets and houses, and empty unbuilt grassy lots.

She looked down upon all, as lone and lonely as a deserted lady in a tower, lifted above these happy, peaceful things by her strange responsibility. Her thoughts could not stay with them; her eyes traveled seaward. She parted the curtains and, leaning a little out, looked westward at the white sea gate.

A whistle, as of some child calling his mate, came sweetly in the silence. It was near, and the questing, expectant note caught her ear. Again it came, sharper, imperative, directly beneath her. She looked down; she was speechless. There was a sudden wild current of blood in her veins. There he stood, the whistler, neither child nor bird, but the man himself—Kerr, looking up at her from the gay oval of her garden. She hung over the window-sill. She looked directly down upon him, foreshortened to a face, and even with the distance and the broad glare of noon between them she recognized his aspect—his gayest, of diabolic glee. There lurked about him the impish quality of the whistle that had summoned her.

"Come down," he called.

All sorts of wonders and terrors were beating around her. He had transcended her wildest wish; he had come to her more openly, more daringly, more romantically than she could have dreamed. All the amazement of why and how he had braved the battery of the windows of her

house was swallowed up in the greater joy of seeing him there, standing in his "grays," with stiff black hat pushed off his hot forehead, hands behind him, looking up at her from the middle of anemones and daffodils.

"Come down," he called again, and waved at her with his slim, glittering stick. How far he had come since their last encounter, to wave at and command her, as if she were verily his own! She left the window, left the room, ran quickly down the stair. The house was hushed; no passing but her own, no butler in the hall, no kitchen-maid on the back stair. Only grim faces of pictures—ancestors not her own—glimmered reproachful upon her as she fled past. Light echoes called her back along the hall. The furniture, the muffling curtains, her own reflection flying through the mirrors, held up to her her madness, and by their mute stability seemed to remind her of the shelter she was leaving—seemed to forbid.

She ran. This was not shelter; it was prison. He was rescue; he was light itself. The only

chance for her was to get near enough to him. Near him no shadow lived. The thing was to get near enough. She rushed direct from shadow into light. She came out into the sun, into the garden with its blaze of wintry summer, its whispering life and the free air over it. The man standing in the middle of it, for all his pot hat and Gothic stick, was none the less its demigod waiting for her, laughing. He might well laugh that she who had written that unflinching letter should come thus flying at his call; but there was more than laughter, there was more than mischief in him. The high tide of his spirits was only the sparkle of his excitement. It was evident that he was there with something of mighty importance to say.

Was it that her letter had finally touched him? Had he come at last to transcend her idea with some even greater purpose? She seemed to see the power, the will for that and the kindness—she could not call it by another word—but though she was beseeching him with all her silent attitude to tell her instantly what the great

thing was, he kept it back a moment, looking at her whimsically, indulgently, even tenderly.

"I have come for you," he said.

"Oh, for me!" she murmured. Surely he couldn't mean that! He was simply putting her off with that.

"I mean it, I mean it," he assured her. "This doesn't make it any less real, my getting at you through a garden. Better," he added, "and sweet of you to make the duller way impossible."

She took a step back. It had not been play to her; but he would have it nothing else. He, too, stepped back and away from her.

"Come," he said, and behind him she saw the lower garden gate that opened on the grassy pitch of the hill, swinging idle and open. The sight of him about to vanish lured her on, and as he continued to walk backward she advanced, following.

"Oh, where?" she pleaded.

"With me!" Such a guaranty of good faith he made it!

She tried to summon her reluctance.

"But why?"

"We'll talk about it as we go along." His hand was on the gate. "We can't stop here, you know. She'll be watching us from the window."

Flora glanced behind her. The windows were all discreetly draped—most likely ambush—but that he should apprehend Clara's eyes behind them! Ah, then, he did know what he was about! He saw Clara as she did. She would almost have been ready to trust him on the strength of that alone. Still she hung back.

"But my things!" she protested. She held up her garden hat. "And my gown!" She looked down at her frail silk flounces. Was ever any woman seen on the street like this!

"Oh, la, la, la," he cut her short. "We can't stop to dress the part. You'll forget 'em."

She smiled at him suddenly, looked back at the house, put on her hat—the garden hat. The moment she had dreaded was upon her. In spite of her warning reason, in spite of everything, she was going with him.

Beyond the looming roofs as they descended

the hill she saw white sails sink out of sight. All the little panorama upon which she had looked down sprang up around her, large and living. He whistled to the car as he helped her down the last steep pitch, whistled and waved, and they ran for it. No time for back-looking, no time now for a faint heart. Before she knew they were fairly crowded into the narrow front seat, and the long street was running up to them and streaming by.

This was never the car one went out the front door to take. This creaked and crawled low, taking the corners comfortably, past houses with all their windows blinking recognition. Hadn't it passed them so for twenty years? Old houses in long gardens, and little houses creeping back behind their yards, not yet encroached upon by fresher ties of living. Past all these and gliding down under high, ragged banks, green grass above with wooden stairways straggling up their naked faces; past these again; past lower levels; past little gray and cluttered houses; past loaded carts of vegetables; past

children playing shrilly, bearing down always on the green square of the plaza wide, worn and foreign, and the Greek church "domed" with blue and yellow, bearing down as if it had fairly determined to make its course straight through this stable center. Then in the very shadow it swerved aside to clatter off in quite another direction along a wider street with whiter shops, and more glittering windows with gilded letters flashing foreign names, with more marked and brilliant colors moving in the crowd, with a clearer stamp on all of Latin living.

Then suddenly for them the sliding panorama ceased. The car had stopped and they had left it, and were standing upon the corner of a still street that came down from the high hills behind them and crossed the car-track and climbed again a little way to curve over into the sky. Dingy houses two blocks above them stood silhouetted against the blue. They were walking upward toward this horizon, leaving color and motion behind them. With every step the street grew more empty, lonely and colorless. Many

of the windows that glimmered at them, passing, were the blank windows of empty houses. Were they taking this way, this curious roundabout out-of-the-world way, of dropping over into the shipping which lay under the hill? For all she knew this might really be his notion, for since they had left the garden gate, though they had looked together at the light and color of the pictures moving past their eyes, they had not exchanged a word.

But all at once he stopped at the intersection of two dusty streets, and his eyes veered down the four perspectives like a voyageur taking his soundings. Elegant as ever and odd enough, yet he wasn't any odder here at the jumping off place of nowhere than he had appeared in the box at the theater, or in the picture gallery. She had the clear impression all at once that he wasn't too odd for anything.

"Here we are!" he said, and indicated with his glittering stick straight before them a little house. It was low, as if it crouched against the wind, faded and beaten by the sun to the drab

of the rock itself, and made so secret with tight-drawn curtains that it seemed to have shut itself up against the world for ever. She wavered. She wasn't afraid of herself out here, out-of-doors under the sky, but she was afraid that those four walls might shut out her new unreasoning joy, might steal away his new tenderness, and bring her back face to face with the same ugly fact that had confronted her in her drawing-room.

"Oh, no," she said, and put her hands behind her with a determination that she wasn't going to move.

"Oh, yes," he said, but he didn't smile. He looked at her quite gravely, reproachfully, and the touch of his fingers on her arm was fine, was delicate, as if to say, "I wouldn't harm you for the world."

She blushed a slow, painful crimson. She hadn't meant that. She hadn't even thought of it; but, since he had, there was nothing for it but to go in. The door shut behind her sharply, with a click like a little trap; and she breathed

such an atmosphere, flat, faint and stale, the mere ghost of some fuller, more fragrant flavor. In the little anteroom where they stood, whose faded ceiling all but brushed their heads, and in the larger little room beyond the Nottingham lace curtains, prevailed a mild shabbiness, a respectable decay. Curtains and table-cloths alike showed a dull and tempered whiteness as if the shadow of time had fallen dim across the whole. The little restaurant seemed left behind in the onward march of the city, and its faded, kindly face was but a shadow of what had been of the vigor and flourish of bourgeois Spain thirty years before. There was no one eating at the little tables, no one sitting behind the high cash-desk in the anteroom. Not a stir of human life in all the place.

"Hello," said Kerr among the tables looking around him, "we've caught them asleep." He rapped on the wall with his cane. Flora peered at him between the curtains, all her fascinated apprehension of what was to follow plain upon her face. "Shall it be a giant or dwarf?" he

asked her. "There's nothing I won't do for you, you know."

The door opened and a little girl with a long black braid and purple apron came in.

"A dwarf," cried Flora. She laughed with a quick relaxing of her strained nerves. It might almost have been the truth from that old little swarthy face and sedate demeanor that hardly noticed them. The child walked gravely up to the desk and mounting to the high stool struck a faint-voiced bell.

"There," said Kerr, "ends formality. Now let the real magic begin!"

"Not black magic," Flora took up his fancy.

He had drawn out a chair for her. "That depends on you. I'm not the magic maker. I have no talisman."

She felt the conscious jewel burn in her possession. She looked up beseechingly at him, but he only laughed, and, with a swing, lifted the chair a little off the ground as he set her up to the table, as if to show how easily he could put forth strength. There was nothing defiant in

him. He was taking her with him—taking her upon the wings of his high spirits; but mischievously, obstinately, he would not show her where the flight was leading, nor let her listen to anything but the rustling of those wings. He was determined to make holiday, whatever was to follow. For the glimpse of blue through the dim window might be the Bay of Naples; and, ah! Chianti. Perhaps the sort one gets down Monte Video way, where France fades into Italy—perhaps, at least if her kind fancy could get the better of the reality. In Sicily there were just such table-cloths as these, and just such fat floor-shaking contadini to wait upon you. And look now at the purple one behind the desk—child or gnome—feet not touching the floor—centuries of Italy in her face. Oh, calculation, indifference!

"She wouldn't care if you jumped up and threw me out of the window," he affirmed. "That's why this hole is so harmless. Oh, isn't that harmless? What's more harmless than to let one alone? There's only one dangerous thing

here," he grinned and let her take her choice of which.

She came straight at it.

"You know I can't let you alone."

He laughed. "Well, isn't that why we're here at last—that you may dictate your terms?"

"I have. Didn't you get my letter?"

"Oh, indeed I did. Haven't I obeyed it? Haven't I kept away from your house? Have I tried to approach you?"

"Haven't you, though?" she threw at him accusingly.

"Ah," he deprecated, "you came to me. I was down in the garden."

She looked at him through his persiflage wistfully, searchingly. "But there were other things in that letter."

"There were?" He regarded her with grave surprise. Oh, how she mistrusted his gravity! "Why, to be sure there were things—things that you didn't mean—one thing above all others you couldn't mean, that you want me to drop

out when the game is half done, to slink away and leave it all like this—abandon you and my Idol so to each other! My dear, for what do you take me?"

She burst out. "But can't you see the danger?"

He met it quietly.

"Certainly. I have been seeing nothing else but the danger—to you. Do you think I've been idle all these days? Every line I have followed has ended in that. It's brought me finally to this." The gesture of his hand included their predicament and the dingy little room. "You'll really have to help me, after all."

"Oh, haven't I tried to? That is why I wrote. Don't you see your own danger at all?"

"No, but I'd like to." He leaned toward her, brows lifted to a quizzical peak.

"Oh, I can't tell you," she despaired. "But somehow I shall have to make you go."

"That will be easy," he said. Leaning back, nursing his chin in his hand, he watched her with a gloomy sort of brooding. "You know what it

is I'm waiting for. You know I won't go without it." His words came sadly, but doggedly, with a grim finality, as if he gave himself up to the course he was following as something he knew was inevitable. The faintness of despair came over her. Only the narrow table was between them, yet all at once, with the mention of the ring, he seemed a long way off. What was this terrible obsession that outweighed every other consideration with him? How get at it? How get through it? Or was it between them for ever?

"Do you care for it so very much?" she asked him, trembling but valiant.

"I care so very much," he repeated slowly, and after a moment of wonder: "Why, don't you?"

"Oh, not for that," she cried sharply. "Not for the sapphire!"

He stared. She had startled him clean out of his brooding. "In Heaven's name, for what, then?"

Oh, she could never tell him it was for him!

In her distress and embarrassment she looked all ways.

His quick white finger touched her on the wrist. "For Cressy?"

The abrupt stern note of his question startled her. She held herself stiff and still for a moment, then: "For every one in this wretched business. I have to."

"Ah," he sighed out the satisfaction of his long uncertainty, "then Cressy *is* in it."

"No, I didn't mean that—you mustn't think it—I can't discuss him with you!" She was hot to recapture her fugitive admission.

"Don't let that disturb you. You haven't given him away to me. I had all I'm likely to get from the man himself."

"He—he told you?" she faltered.

"He told me nothing. Don't you know that he misdoubts me? I got it out of him, by sleight of hand—where we had met before. Has he never told you anything of that morning when we left your house together?"

"Never." The admission cost her an effort.

He mused at her. "As I said, he told *me* nothing, but it occurred to me when he came in that we might be there on the same errand."

She paled. "You mean—?"

"I mean I thought it might be safer all around that you should not see him that morning; so I got him away. He hasn't asked you for it since?"

"The sapphire?" she faltered. "No!" The more her instinct warned that it had been the jewel Harry had returned for, the more she repudiated the idea to Kerr.

"Why should you think he came for that? What has he to do with it?" she murmured.

"My God! how you do champion him!" He leaned forward sharply across the table. "What is this man to you?"

He was going too far. He had no right to that question. "The man I have promised to marry." Her hot look, her cold manner defied him to command her here. Yet for a moment, leaning forward with his clenched hands on the table, he looked ready to spring up and force her

words back on her. The next he let it go and dropped back in his chair again.

"Quite so," he said. "But I didn't believe it." He stared at her with a dull, profound resentment. "Yet it's most possible; since it isn't the sapphire it would be that." He mused. "But, you extraordinary woman, why on earth—" he broke off, still looking at her, looking with a persistent, sharp, studying eye, as if she were the most puzzling and, it came to her gradually, the most dubious thing on earth. He was verily a magician, a worker of black magic; for under the spell of his eyes she felt herself turning into something horrible. However innocent she was in intention, the ugly appearance was covering her.

"Then what are you doing here with the ring on you?" he demanded solemnly. "Why are you dealing with me? What do you think you'll get out of it? Good God! women are hideous! How can you betray the man you love?"

"Oh," she cried, with a wail of horror. She stood up trembling and pale. "I don't—I don't

—I don't! I've kept it from them. I'm standing against them all. I shall never give it to them. When have I ever betrayed you?"

He drew back, away from her, as if to ward off her meaning, but she leaned toward him, her hands flung out, holding herself up to him for all she meant. He got up slowly and the creeping tide of red, dusky and violent, rising over his face, swelling his features, darkening his eyes, hung before her like a banner of shame.

"I didn't know, I didn't know," he repeated in a low voice. His eyes were on the ground. Then, with a sharp motion, as if merely standing in front of her was unendurable, "Oh, Lord!" he said, and, turning, walked from her toward the window. He went precipitately, as if he meant to go through it, but he only leaned against it and stood motionless; and from her side of the table, trembling, breathless, she watched his stricken silhouette black upon the gray, fading light.

The knowledge of how far she had gone, of how much she had betrayed herself, swelled and

swelled before her mind until it seemed to fill her life, but she looked at it hardily and unabashed. All the decencies in the world should sink before he thought her a traitor. She came softly up beside him.

"Don't be sorry for what I told you."

"I'm not," he said. His voice sounded muffled. He did not look at her, only held out his arm in a mute sign to her to come. She felt it around her, but it was a mere symbol of protection. It lay limp on her shoulder, and he continued to stare through the window at the street. "I'm not sorry for what you said," he repeated slowly. "I'm glad; but, child, I wish it wasn't true."

"Don't, don't!" she besought him, "for I don't."

He gave her a look. "That's beautiful of you, but"—and he turned to the window again and spoke to himself—"it puts an awful face on my business. All along you've made me think for you, and of you, more than you deserve, more than I can afford." The stare she gave this forced out of him a reluctant smile. "Why,

didn't you know it? Do you think I couldn't have had the sapphire that first night I saw it on your hand, if it hadn't been—well, for the way I thought of you? I fancied you knew that then." He made a restless movement. His arm fell from her shoulder. "There's been only one thing to do from the first," he said, "and I don't see my way to it."

"Oh, don't take it! Leave it!" she pleaded. "Leave it with me! What does it matter so much? A jewel! If only you would leave it and go away from me!"

He whirled on her. "In Heaven's name, a fine piece of logic! Leave the sapphire to people who can make no better use of it than I? Leave you to go on with this business and marry this Cressy? Even suppose you gave me the sapphire, I couldn't let you do that!"

"If I gave you the sapphire," Flora said, "oh, he wouldn't marry me then!" She couldn't tell how this had come to her, but all at once it was clear, like a sign of her complete failure; but Kerr only wondered at her distress.

"Well, if you don't want to marry him, what do you care?"

"Oh, I don't, I don't care for that." She sank back listlessly in her chair again. She couldn't explain, but in her own mind she knew that if she lost the sapphire she would so lose in her own esteem; so fail at every point that counted, that she would never be able to see or be seen in the world again as the same creature. Even to Kerr—even to him to whom she would have yielded she would have become a different thing. She realized now she had staked everything on the premise that she wouldn't have to yield; and now it began to appear to her that she would. His weakness was appearing now as a terrible strength, a strength that seemed on the point of crushing her, but it could never convince her. That strength of his had brought her here. Was it to happen here, that strange thing she had foreseen, the end of her? Was it here she was to lose the sapphire, and him?

She looked vaguely around the room, at the most impassive aspect of the place, as at a place

she never expected to leave; the darkening windows, the fast-shut door, the child leaning on the desk, watching them with sharp, incurious eyes—this would be her niche for ever. She would be left for ever with the crusts and the dregs. And Kerr's figure in the twilight seemed each time it moved to be on the point of vanishing into the grayness. He moved continually up and down the narrow spaces between the tables. He troubled the dry repose of the place. Sometimes he looked at her, studying, questioning, undecided. Once he stopped, as if just there an idea had arrested him. He looked at her, as if, she thought, he were afraid of her. Then for long moments he stood looking blankly, steadily out of the window. He did not approach her. He seemed to avoid her, until, as though he had come at last to his decision, he walked straight up to her and stood above her. She rose to meet him. He was smiling.

"Don't you know that you could easily get rid of me?" he demanded. "Cressy would be too glad to do it for you; and there are more ways

than one that I could get the sapphire from you, if I could face the idea of it—but really, really we care too much for each other. There's only one way out for you and me and the sapphire. I'll take you both."

Her clenched hands opened and fell at her sides. A great wave of helplessness flowed over her. Her eyes, her throat filled up with a rush of blinding tears. She put out her hands, trying to thrust him off, but he took the wrists and held them apart, and held her a moment helpless before him.

"Oh, no," she whispered.

"But I love you."

Her head fell back. She looked at him as if he had spoken the incredible.

"I love you," he repeated, "though God knows how it has happened!"

The blood rushed to her heart.

He was drawing her nearer.

She felt his breath upon her face; she saw the image of herself in his eyes. She started to herself on the edge of danger, and made a strug-

gle to release her wrists. He let them go. She sank down into her chair.

"Why not? Why won't you go with me?" she heard him say again, still close beside her.

"I can't, I can't!" She clung to the words, but for the moment she had forgotten her reasons. She had forgotten everything but the wonderful fact that he loved her. He was there within reach, and she had only to stretch out her hand, only to say one word, and he would cut through the ranks of her perplexities and terrors, and carry her away.

"Why not, if you love me?" he insisted. "Are you afraid of those people? Are you afraid of Cressy? He shall never come near you."

She shook her head. "No, it isn't that."

He stooped and looked into her face. "Then what keeps you?"

She looked up slowly.

"My honor."

"Your honor!" For a moment her answer seemed to have him by surprise. He mused, and again it came dreamily back to her that he was

looking at her across a vast difference no will of hers could ever bridge.

"Don't you see what I am?" she murmured. "Can't you imagine where I stand in this hideous business? It's my trust. I'm on their side; and, oh, in spite of everything, I can't make myself believe in giving it to you!"

He pondered this very gravely.

"Yes, I can see how you might feel that way. But is the feeling really yours? Are you sure they haven't put it on you? Might not my honor do as well for you, if you were mine?" It struck her she had never connected him with honor, and he read her thought with a flash of humor. "Evidently it hasn't occurred to you that I have an honor."

She looked at him sadly. "In spite of everything I'm on the other side. I belong to them."

"You belong to me." His hand closed on hers. "Mine is the only honor you have to think of. Can't you trust that I am right? Can't you see it through my eyes? Can't you make yourself all mine?" His arm was around her now,

holding her fast, but she turned her face away, and his kisses fell only on her cheek and hair.

"Oh," she cried, "if only I could!"

"Don't you love me?"

"Oh, yes, but that makes me see, all the more, the dreadful difference between us."

"You silly child, there is no difference, really."

"Ah, yes, you know it as well as I. You were afraid of it, too. All that long time you were walking around you were wondering whether you dared to take me."

He denied her steadily, "Never!"

She loved him for that gallant denial, for she knew he had been afraid, horribly afraid, more afraid than she was now; but that strange quality of his that gave to a double risk a double zest had set him all the hotter on this resolution.

He sat for some long moments thoughtfully looking straight before him. She, glancing at his profile, white and faintly glimmering in the twilight, thought it looked sharp, absorbed and set. She could see his great determination grow-

ing there in the gloom between them, looming and overshadowing them both.

"I see," he said at last. "I'll simply have to take you in spite of it." He turned around to her, and reached his hands down through the dusk. She was being drawn up into arms which she could not see. Her hands were clasped around a neck, her cheek was against a face which she had never hoped to touch. Her reason and her fears were stifled and caught away from her lips with her breath. She was giving up to her awful weakness. She was giving up to the power of love. She was letting herself sink into it as she would sink into deep water. The sense of drowning in this profound, unfathomable element, of shutting her eyes and opening her arms to it, was the highest she had ever touched; but all at once the memory of what she was leaving behind her, like a last glimpse of sky, swept her with fear. She made a desperate effort to rescue herself before the waters quite closed over her head.

She pulled herself free. Without his arms

around her for the first moment she could hardly stand. She took an uncertain step forward; then with a rush she reached the white curtains. They flapped behind her. She heard Kerr laugh, a note, quiet, caressing, almost content. It came from the gloom like a disembodied voice of triumph. Her rush had carried her into the middle of the anteroom. At this last moment was there to be no miracle to save her? There was no rescue among these dumb walls and closed-up windows. The purple child gave her a sharp, bird-like glance, as if the most that this wild woman could want was "change." Flora looked behind her and saw Kerr, who had put aside the curtains and was standing looking at her. He was bright and triumphant in that twilight room. He was not afraid of losing her now. He knew in that one moment he had imprisoned her for ever! She saw him approaching, but though all her mind and spirit strained for flight, something had happened to her will. It tottered like her knees.

He stooped and picked up an artificial rose,

which had fallen from her hat, and put it into her hand. A moment, with his head bent, he stood looking into her face, but without touching her.

"Sit down over there," he said, and pointed toward a chair against the wall. She went meekly like a prisoner. He spoke to the child in the purple apron, who was still sitting behind the desk. He put some money on the cash-desk in front of her. It was gold. It shone gorgeously in the dull surrounding, and the child pounced upon it, incredulous of her luck. Then he turned, crossed the room, soundlessly opened the door, and went out into the violet dark of the street.

The child furtively tested her coin, biting it as if to taste the glitter, and Flora waited, lost, given up by herself, passively watching for the room to be filled again with his presence. He was back after a long minute, and this time took up his stand at the door, where, pushing aside the tight-drawn curtain a little, from time to time he looked out into the street. Sometimes his

eyes followed the cracks of the plastered wall, sometimes he studied the floor at his feet; every moment she saw he was alert, expectantly watching and waiting; and though he never looked at her sitting behind him, she felt his protection between her and the darkening street. She sat in the shadow of it, feeling it all around her, claiming her as it would claim her henceforth, from the world. A ghost of light glimmered along the curtains of the window, and stopped, quivering, in the middle of the curtained door. Then he turned about and beckoned her. Sheer weakness kept her sitting. He went to her, took her face between his hands, and looked into it long and intently.

"You don't want to go!" The words fell from his lips like an accusal. His sudden realization of what she felt held him there dumb with disappointment. "You have won me," her look was saying, "and yet I have immediately become a worthless thing, because I am going; and I don't believe in going." She felt she had failed him—how cruelly, was written in his face. But it was

only for a moment that she made him hesitate. The next he shook himself free.

"Well, come," he said.

She felt that all doors would fly open at his bidding. She felt herself swept powerless at his will with all the yielding in her soul that she had felt in her body when his arms were around her. He had taken her by the hand—he was leading her out into the gusty night, where all lights flared—the gas-lights marching up the street over the hill into the unknown, and the lights gleaming at her like eyes in the dark bulk of the carriage waiting before the door. It all glimmered before her—a picture she might never see again—might not see after she passed through the carriage door that gaped for her. The will that had swept her out of the door was moving her beyond her own will, as it had moved her that morning in the garden, beyond all things that she knew. There was no feeling left in her but the despair of extreme surrender.

She found herself in the carriage. She saw his face in the carriage door as pale as anger,

yet not angry; it was some bigger thing that looked at her from his eyes. He looked a long while, as if he bade her never to forget this moment. Then, "I'll give you twenty-four hours," he said. "This man will take you home." He shut the carriage door—shut it between them. Before she had gathered breath he had straightened, fallen back, raised his hat, and the carriage was turning. Flora thrust her head, straw hat and ribbons out of the window.

"Oh, I love you!" she called to him. She sank back in the cushions and covered her face with her hands.

XVIII

GOBLIN TACTICS

FOR a little she kept her face hidden, shutting out the present, jealously living with the wonderful thing that had happened to her. It was as wonderful as anything she had dreamed might come when she had written him that letter. And if she needed any proof of his love, she had had it in the moment when he had let her go. There he had transcended her hope. She felt lifted up, she felt triumphant, though the triumph had not been hers. It was all his; he had saved her from her own weakness; his was the miracle. How he shone to her! The dark, swaying hollow of the carriage seemed still full of his presence, full of his hurried whispering; and again she seemed to see him standing outside the window in the deep blue evening holding out his hands to her cry of "I love you!"

He had been wonderful in a way she had not expected. He had shown her so beautifully that he could be reached in spite of his obsession. Might not she hope to touch him just a little further? Was there any height now that he might not rise to? She seemed to see the possible end of it all shaping itself out of his magnanimity. She seemed to see him finally relinquishing his passion for the jewel, and his passion for her for the sake of something finer than both. She had seen it foreshadowed in what he had done this day—having them both in his hands, he had put them away from him. Yet in that action she knew there had been no finality. She had touched him, but she had not convinced him, and as long as he was unconvinced he would be at her again in some other way.

Her hands dropped from her face, and she confronted the fact drearily. "No," she thought, "he never gives up what he wants."

She looked out of the window. The flickers of gas-lamps fell intermittently through it upon her. Her queer vehicle was rattling crazily—

jolting as if every spring were at its last leap. She was out of the quiet, blue street. Montgomery Avenue, with its lights, its glittering gilt names and Latin insignia, was traveling by on either side of her. The voice of the city was growing louder in her ears, the crowd on the pavement increased. At intervals the carriage dipped through glares of electric lights that illuminated its interior in a flash broader than day —the ragged cushions, the raveled tassels, the limp-swinging shutters, and, glimmering in the midst, wild and disheveled, herself in all the little wavy mirrors. She sat looking out at the maze of moving lights and figures without seeing them, intent on an idea that was growing clearer, larger, moment by moment in her mind.

Kerr's appearance in her garden—his capture of her—had not been the fantastic freak it had seemed. He had had his purpose. He had taken her out of her environment; he had carried her beyond succor or menace just that he might carry them both so much further and faster through their differences. They had not

reached the point of agreement yet, but might they not on some other ground, where they could be unchallenged? It seemed to her if she could only meet him on her own ground for once—instead of for ever on Clara's or Harry's—only meet him alone, somewhere beyond their reach, it might be accomplished, it might be brought to the end she so wished. Yet where to go to be rid of Clara and Harry, the two so closely associated with every fact of her life?

The hack, which had been moving along at a rapid pace, slowed now to a walk among the thickening traffic, and from a mere moving mass the crowd appeared as individuals—a stream of dark figures and white faces. Her eyes slipped from one to another. Here one stood still on the lamp-lit corner, looking down, with lips moving quickly and silently. It was strange to see those rapid, eager, moving lips with no sound from them audible. Then her eyes were startled by something familiar in the figure, though the direct down-glare of the ball of light above him distorted the features with shadows. She pressed

her face against the window-glass in palpitating doubt. It was Harry.

She cowered in the corner of the carriage. In a moment the risks of her situation were before her. Had he seen her? Oh, no, at least not yet. He had been too intent on whomever he was talking to. She peered to make sure that he was still safely on the street corner. He was just opposite, and now that the eddy of the crowd had left a little clear space around him she saw with whom he was talking. It was a small, very small, shabby, nondescript man—possibly only a boy, so short he seemed. His back was toward her. His clothes hung upon him with an odd un-Anglo-Saxon air. He was foreign with a foreignness no country could explain—Italian, Portuguese, Greek—whatever he was, he was a strange foil to Harry, so bright and burnished.

The hack was turning. She realized with dismay that it was turning sharp around that very corner where they stood. Suppose Harry should chance to glance through its window and see Flora Gilsey sitting trembling within. The

hack wheezed and cramped, and all at once she heard it scrape the curb. Then she was lost! She looked up brave in her desperation, ready to meet Harry's eyes. She saw the back of his head. For a moment it loomed directly above her, then it moved. He was separating from his companion. With one stride he vanished out of the square frame of the window, and there remained full fronting her, staring in upon her, the face of his companion.

Back flashed to her memory the goldsmith's shop—dull hues and odors all at once—and that wide unwinking stare that had fixed her from the other side of the counter. The blue-eyed Chinaman! In the glare of white light, in his terrible clearness and nearness, she knew him instantly.

The hack plunged forward, the face was gone. But she remained nerveless, powerless to move, frozen in her stupefaction, while her vehicle pursued its crazy course. It was clattering up Sutter Street toward Kearney, where at this hour the town was widest awake, and the

crowd was a crowd she knew. At any instant people she knew might be going in and out of the florists' shops and restaurants, or passing her in carriages. And what of Flora Gilsey in her morning dress and garden hat, in a night-hawk of a Telegraph Hill hack, flying through their midst like a mad woman? They were the least of her fears. She had forgotten them. The only thing that remained to her was the memory of Harry and the blue-eyed Chinaman together on the street corner.

She had been given a glimpse of that large scheme that Harry was carrying forward somewhere out of her sight—such a glimpse as Clara had given her in the rifling of her room, as Ella had shown in her hysterical revelation. Again she felt the threat of these ominous signs of danger, as a lone general at a last stand with his troops clustered at his back sees in front, and behind, on either side of him, the glitter of bayonets in the bushes.

She was in the midst of the tangled traffic of Kearney Street. Swimming lights and crowds

were all around her. She peered forth cautiously upon it. She saw a florid face, a woman she knew casually—and there her eyes fastened, not for the woman's brilliant presence, but for what she saw directly in front of it, thrown into relief upon its background—a short and shabby figure, foreign, equivocal, reticent, the figure of a blue-eyed Chinaman.

He was standing still while the crowd flowed past him. This time he was alone. He seemed to be waiting, yet not to watch, as if he had already seen what he was expecting and knew that it must pass his way. It was uncanny, his reappearance, at a second interval of her route, standing as if he had stood there from the first, patient, expectant, motionless. It was worse than uncanny.

All at once an idea, wild and illogical enough, jumped up in her mind. Couldn't this miserable vehicle that was lumbering like a disabled bug move faster and rattle her on out of reach of the glare, the publicity, the threat of discovery, and, above all, of her discomforting notion?

She breathed out relief as the carriage dipped into the comparative quiet again, and she felt herself being driven on and up a gently rising street between block-apart, lone gas-lamps. She thrust her face as far out of the window as she dared, looking back at the lights and traffic which were drifting behind her. At this distance she could single out no one figure from the crowd, and no figure which could possibly be that of the blue-eyed Chinaman was moving up the street behind her. There only remained a disquieting memory of him on the corner with Harry. Together they made a combination, to her mind, threatening to the man she loved, for whom she so desperately feared.

If ever she had felt herself helpless, it was in this moment passing along the half-lit, half-empty city street. By what she knew, by what she wore around her neck, she was separated from all peace-abiding citizens—she was outlawed. Every closed door and shaded window (so many she had opened or looked out of!) now seemed shut and shaded against her for ever.

Night and the reticent gray city, averting their eyes, let her slip through unregarded.

She was passing that section of large, old-fashioned mansions, cupolaed, towered, indistinct at the top of their high, broad steps, or back among the trees of their gardens. Along the front of one stretched a high hedge of laurestinas black as a ribbon of the night, capacious of shadows; and it seemed to Flora that all at once a shadow detached itself. She looked with a start. It flashed along the pavement—if shadow it were—running head down with a strange, scattering movement of arms and legs, yet seeming to make such speed that for a moment it kept abreast of the cab. She could see no features, no lineament of this strange thing to recognize, yet instantly she knew what it must be—what she had feared and thought impossible. She thrust her head far out and addressed the driver.

"Go as fast as you can, faster! and I'll give you twice what he gave you." The words rang so wildly to her own ears that she half expected

the driver to peer down like an old bird of prey from his perch and demand her reason. But he made no sound or sign. It may have been that in his time he had heard even wilder requests than hers. He only sent his whip cracking forward to the ears of the lean horse, and the cab began to rattle like a mad thing.

Flora leaned back with a sigh of relief. The mere sensation of being borne along at such a rate, the sight of houses, lamp-posts, even people here and there, flitting away from the eye, unable to interrupt her course, or even to glimpse her identity, gave her a feeling of safety. The more she was getting into the residence part of the city, the more deserted the streets, the closer shut the windows of the houses, the more it seemed to her as if the night itself covered and abetted her flight. So swiftly she went it was only a wonder how the cab held together. She had never traveled more rapidly in her light and silent carriage. Now they whirled the corner and plunged at the steep rise of a cross street. Just above, over the crown of the hill, she saw the sky, moon-

less, blackish, spattered with stars. Then against it a little fluttering shape like a sentinel wisp—the only living thing in sight. It was incredible, impossible, horrible that he should be there, in front of her, waiting for her, who had driven so fast—too fast, it had seemed, for human foot to follow. By what unimaginable route had he traveled? She was ready to believe he had flown over the housetops. And above all other horrors, why was he pursuing her?

The carriage was abreast the Chinaman now, and immediately he took up his trot, for a little while keeping up, dodging along between light and shadow, presently falling behind. At intervals she heard the patter, patter, patter of his footsteps following; at intervals she lost the sound, and shadows would engulf the figure, and she would wait in a panic for its reappearance. For she knew it was there somewhere, on one side of the street or the other. But, oh, not to see it! To expect at any moment it might start up again—Heaven knew where, perhaps at her very carriage window. Her

unconscious hand was doubled to a fist upon her breast, fast closed upon the sapphire.

With all her body braced, she leaned and looked far backward, and far forward, and now for a long time saw nothing. The distance was empty. The glare of arc-lights showed her the shadows of her own progress—the shadow of her vehicle shooting huge and misshapen now on the cobbles, now along a blank wall, wheels, body and driver, all lurching like one; now heaped on each other, now tenuously drawn out, now twisting themselves into shapes the mind could not account for. For here, whirling the corner, the carriage seemed to wave an arm, and now between the wheels, fast twinkling, she saw a pair of legs. She leaned and looked, so mesmerized with this grotesque appearance that it scarcely troubled her that all the way down the last long hill she knew it must be that a man was running at her wheel.

The warm lights of her house were just before her, offering succor, stiffening courage. It would be but a dash from the door of the cab to

her own door. There was no second course, once the cab stopped. She felt that to lurk in its gloom would mean robbery, perhaps death. She thought without fear, but with an intense calculation. Her hand held the door at swing as the cab drew up. Before it should stop she must leap. She gathered her skirts and sprang —sprang clean to the sidewalk. The steps of her house rushed by her in her upward flight. Her bell pealed. She covered her eyes.

For the moment before Shima opened the door there was nothing but darkness and silence. She had never been so glad of anything in her life as of the kind, astute, yellow face he presented to her distressed appeal.

"Shima," she panted, "pay the cab; and if there's any one else there say that I'll call the police—no, no, send him away." There was no question or hesitation in Shima's obedience. Through the glass of the door she watched him descend upon his errand, until he disappeared over the edge of the illumination of the vestibule. She waited, dimly aware of voices going

on beyond the curtains of the drawing-room, but all her listening power was concentrated on the silence without—a silence that remained unbroken, and out of which Shima returned with the same imperturable countenance.

"He wants ten dollars."

"Oh, yes, give him anything," Flora gasped. If that was all the Chinaman had followed her for! But her relief was momentary, for instantly Shima was back again.

"I gave him ten dollars, the cabman."

Now she gasped indeed. "Oh, the cabman! But the other one!" For an instant Shima seemed to hesitate; glancing past her shoulder as if there was something that he doubted behind her. Then as she still hung on his answer he brought it out in a lowered voice.

"Madam, there was no one else there."

XIX

THE FACE IN THE GARDEN

WITH her hand at her distressed forehead she turned, and saw, between the curtains of the drawing-room, Harry, and behind him Clara, looking out at her with faces of amazement, and she fancied, horror. Harry came straight for her.

"Why, you poor child, what's happened to you?"

She gave him a look. She couldn't forget their scene in the red room, but the mixture of apprehension and real concern in his face went far toward melting her. She might even have told him something, at least a part of the truth, but for that other standing watching her from the drawing-room door. With Clara, there was nothing for it but to ignore her disordered hair,

her hat in her hand, her ruffle torn and trailing on the floor.

She put on a splendid nonchalance, as if it were none of their business. "Oh, I am sorry if I kept you waiting."

It was Clara who spoke to her, past Harry's blank astonishment. "Why, we don't mind waiting a few moments more while you dress."

"I shan't have to dress." Such a statement Flora felt must amaze even Shima, waiting like an image on the threshold of the dining-room. But if these people were waiting to be amazed she felt herself equal to amazing them to the top of their expectations.

"Oh, but at least go up and let Marrika give you some pins," Clara protested, hurrying forward as if fairly to drive her.

"Thank you, no, this will do," Flora said. On one point she was quite clear. She wasn't going to leave those two together for a moment to discuss her plight; not till she could first get at Harry alone. Then and there she turned to the mirror and with her combs began to catch

back and smooth the disorder of her hair, seeing all the while Clara's reflection hovering perturbed and vigilant in the background of her own.

While her hands were busy seeming to accommodate Clara, her mind was marshaled to Clara's outwitting. The only thing to do was to tell nothing. Let Clara spend her time in guessing. Unless by some wild chance she had seen Kerr in the garden she couldn't come near the truth of what had happened. But what was to be done with Harry? Harry was too close to her to be ignored. Her attitude toward him had undergone a change. In the moment in the red room, when she had seen him break the one feeling that had held her to him, the feeling of awe and respect had evaporated. She felt that it was quite impossible now for them to go on on the same footing; yet, as long as she kept the sapphire she must somehow manage to keep up an appearance of it. She must tell him something.

At that dreadful dinner, where she sat a con-

scious frustrater of these two silent ones, glancing at Harry's face, she knew that if she didn't attack she would be attacked by him. It was here in the midst of the noiseless passings of Shima, watching Harry's suspicious glances flashing across the table at her strange disorder, that the idea occurred to her of a way out of it. She was bold enough to try a daring thrust at the mystery. If ever a hunter was to be led off on a false scent, Harry was that one. She was amazed at the sudden, fearless impulse that had sprung up in her. She wasn't even afraid to say to him under Clara's nose, "Harry, I want you to myself after dinner. Come up into the garden study."

He was very willing to follow her. She thought she detected in his alacrity something more than curiosity or concern. It seemed almost as if Harry was ashamed of that scene in the red room, and anxious to make it up with her. He even tried before they had reached the head of the stairs. "Oh, Flora—I say, Flora, I—"

But an explanation between them was the last thing she wanted just then. She fairly ran, leaving him panting in the wake of her airy skirts.

For the first time since the thing began Clara was left out completely. Flora knew she was even left out of a possibility of listening at the keyhole. For the bright, tight, little room into which Harry followed her was approached by a square entry and a double door. The room itself overhung the garden as a ship's deck overhangs the sea. Leather books and long red curtains were the note of it. She and Harry had often been here together before. Harry had made love to her here, and she had found it pleasurable enough. But the fact that she could recall it now with distaste made this familiar surrounding seem strange, and they themselves strangest of all.

He hadn't got his breath. He had hardly shut the door on them before she began. "Well, something has happened." She had his attention. His other purpose was arrested. "Oh,

something extraordinary. I would have told you on the spot, only I thought you would rather Clara didn't know it."

"I?" That left him staring. "What have I to do with it?"

At this she gave him a long look. "It was through you he ever had the chance of seeing me. I mean the blue-eyed Chinaman. He has followed me all the evening. He followed me here to the very door." Flora's array of facts fell so fast, so hard, so pointed, that for a moment they held him speechless in the middle of the room.

Any fleeting suspicion she might have had of his complicity in the Chinaman's pursuit vanished. He showed plain bewilderment. For a moment he was more at sea than herself. The next she saw the shadow of a thought so disturbing that it sharpened his ruddy face to harshness. He stepped toward her. "What did he say to you?" He loomed directly above her, threatening.

"Nothing. He didn't say anything. But I

know he followed me quite to the house, for I saw his shadow all the way down the hill."

Harry still breathed quickly. "Where—how did he come across you?"

She'd been prepared for that question.

"I was driving down Sutter Street and he saw me at the carriage window."

Harry stood tense, poised, catching everything as she tossed it off; then as if all at once he felt the full weight of the burden, "Lord!" he said, and let himself down heavily into a chair. It was plain in his helpless stare that he knew exactly what it all meant. Laying her hands on the high chair-arms, leaning down so that she could look into his face, Flora made her thrust.

"What do you think he wants?" she gently asked. It was as if she would coax it out of him. His answer was correspondingly low and soft.

"It's that damned ring."

She heard her secret fear spoken aloud with such assurance that she waited, certain at the next moment Harry's voice would people the si-

lence with all the facts that had so far escaped her. But when, after a moment of looking before him he did speak, he went back to the beginning, which they both knew.

"You know he didn't want to part with it in the first place."

"Yes, yes; but he did," Flora insisted.

"Well," he answered quickly, "but that was before—" He caught himself and went on with a scarcely perceptible break: "He may have had a better offer for it since."

He couldn't have put it more mildly, and yet that temperate phrase brought back to her in a flash a windy night full of raucous voices and the great figures in the paper that had covered half a page—the reward for the Crew Idol. Could it be that—that sum so overwhelming to human caution and human decency which Harry had cloaked by his grudging phrase "some better offer"? What else could he mean? And what else could the blue-eyed Chinaman mean by his strange pursuit of her?

"Some one must have wanted it awfully,"

Flora tried again, keeping step with his mild admission.

Harry covered her with an impressive stare. "There's something queer about that ring," he nodded to her. He was going to tell her at last! She gazed at him in expectation, but presently she realized that nothing more was coming. He had stopped at the beginning. She tried to urge him on.

"Queer, what do you mean?" She was feigning surprise.

He looked at her cautiously. "Why, you must have noticed it yourself when we were at the shop. And now, to-night, his having followed you."

She could see him hesitate, choosing his words. She knew well enough her own fear of saying too much—but, what was Harry afraid of? Did he suspect her feeling for Kerr? Was that why he was holding back, leaving out, giving her the small, expurgated version of what he knew. She tried again, making it plainer.

"You think the ring is something he ought

not to have had; something that belongs somewhere else?"

He looked away from her, around the room, as if to pick up his answer from some of the corners. "Well, anyway, it's lucky we waited about that setting," he said with quick irrelevance. "If you're going to be annoyed in this way you'd better let me have it."

Why hadn't she thought of that! It was what any man might say, after hearing such a story as hers, yet it was the last thing she had thought of, and the last thing she wanted.

"Oh, leave it with me," she quavered, "at least till you're sure!"

"Oh, no!" He gave his head a quick, decided shake. "If something should come out you wouldn't want to be mixed up in it."

"Then why not give it back to the Chinaman?" she tried him.

"Oh, that's ridiculous." He was in a passion. His darkening eyes, his swelling nostrils, his aspect so out of proportion to her mild and almost playful suggestion, frightened her. He

saw it and instantly his mood dropped to mere irritation. "Oh, Flora, don't make a scene about it. This thing has been on my mind for days —the thought that you had the ring. I was afraid I had no business to let you have it in the first place, and what you've told me to-night has clean knocked me out. I don't know what I'm saying. Come, let me have it; and if there's anything queer about the business, at least we'll get it cleared up."

But, smiling, she retreated before him.

"Why, Flora," he argued, half laughing, but still with that dry end of irritation in his voice, "what on earth do you want to keep the thing for?"

By this time she backed against the window, and faced him. "Why, it's my engagement ring."

He looked at her. She couldn't tell whether he was readiest to laugh or rage.

"You gave it to me for that," she pleaded. "Why shouldn't I keep it, until you give me a real reason for giving it up? If you really know

anything, why don't you tell me?" She was sure she had him there; but he burst out at last:

"Well, for a fact, I know it is stolen!" He leaned toward her; and his arms, still flung out with the hands open as argument had left them, seemed to her frightened eyes all ready for her, ready with his last argument, his strength.

Once before she had feared herself face to face with the same threat in the eyes and body of another man, but here, her only fear was lest Harry should get the sapphire away from her. His doing so would dash down no ideal of him. It was mere physical terror that made her tremble and raise her hand to her breast. Instantly she saw how she had betrayed the sapphire again. He had taken hold of her wrist, and, twist as she might, he held it, horribly gentle.

She pressed back against the glass until she felt it hard behind her.

"Harry," she whispered, "if you care anything, if you ever want me for yours, you'll take your hands away." She meant it; she was

sincere in that moment, for all she shrank from him. Her body and mind would not have been too great a price to give him for the sapphire.

But these he seemed to set aside as trivial. These he expected as a matter of course; he was going to have that other thing, too—the thing she had clung to as a man clings to life; and that now, parting from, she would give up not without a struggle as sharp as that with which the body gives up breath. She wrestled. He seemed all hands. He put aside her struggles, her pleadings, as if they were thistle-down.

Then all at once she felt his arm around her neck. She couldn't move her body. She could only turn her head from his hot breath. For a moment he held her, and yet another moment; and then, terrified at what this strange immobility might mean, she raised her eyes and saw he was not looking at her. Though he held her fast he was not conscious of her. Straight over her head he looked, through the window and down into the garden. Her eyes followed. It lay beneath, the wonder of its morning aspect all

blanched and dim. She saw the silhouette of rose branches in black on the sky. She saw the flowers and bushes all one dull tone. But in the midst of them the oval of the path shone white; and there, as in the afternoon, standing, looking upward, was the dark figure of a man.

Her heart gave a great leap. Just so she'd been summoned once before that day, but what infernal freak had fetched him back to repeat that dangerous sally, and brought him finally into his enemy's grasp? She tried to make a gesture to warn him, and just there Harry released her, dropped her so that she half fell upon the window-seat, and made a dash across the room for the light. In a moment they were in darkness. In a moment, to Flora pressed against the window, the garden sprang clear, and on the formless figure below the face appeared, white in the starlight looking up. She cried out in wonder. It was not Kerr. It was the blue-eyed Chinaman.

After her haunted drive, after her escape, after Shima's search, he was there, still inex-

orably there; small, diminished by the great façade of the house, but looking up at it with his calm eye, surveying it, measuring its height, numbering its doors, trying its windows. Harry was beside her again. He was tugging frantically at the window. It resisted. She saw his hands trembling while he wrestled with it. Then it went shrieking up and he leaned out.

"What do you want?" he called, and, though he used no name, Flora saw he knew with whom he was speaking. The Chinaman stood immobile, lifting his round, white face, whose mouth seemed to gape a little. Harry leaned far out and lowered his voice.

"Go away, Joe! Don't come here; never come here!" There was a quiver in his voice. Anger or apprehension, or both, whatever his passion was, for the moment it overwhelmed him, and as the Chinaman stood unmoved, unmoving, at his commands, Harry turned sharp from the window and dashed out of the room. Flora heard him running, running down the stairs. She hung there breathless, waiting to

see him meet the motionless figure; but while she looked and waited that motionless figure suddenly took life. It moved, it turned, it flitted, it mixed with shadows, became a shadow; and then there was nothing there.

Nothing was there when Harry burst out of the garden door and stood staring in the empty oval. How distracted, how violent he looked, balked of his prey! He was stalking the garden, beating the bushes, walking up and down. All at once he stopped and raised a white baffled face to her window. She shrank away. *She* was in peril of Harry now. He knew her no longer innocent. She had held the ring against him in the face of the fact he had told her it was stolen. And he must guess her motive. He must suspect her now.

In her turn she ran, up and up a twisted side stair, shortest passage to her own rooms. At least lock and key could keep her safe for the next few hours. After that she must think of something else.

XX

FLIGHT

BY five o'clock in the morning she was already moving softly to and fro, so softly as not to rouse the sleeping Marrika. By seven her lightest bag was packed, herself was bathed, brushed, dressed even to hat and gloves, and standing at her window with all the listening alert look of one in a waiting-room expecting a train. She was watching for the city to begin to stir; watching for enough traffic below in the streets to make her own movement there not too noticeable. Yet every moment she waited she was in terror lest her fate should take violent form at last and assail her in the moment of escape. She listened for a foot ascending to her room with a message from Clara demanding an au-

dience. She listened for the peal of the electric bell under Harry's hasty hand—Harry, arrived even at this unwarranted hour with Heaven knew what representative of law to force the sapphire from her.

But all her household was still unstirring when at last she went, soft step after step, down the broad and polished stair and across the empty hall. She went quiet, direct, determined, not at all as she had fled on her other perilous enterprise only yesterday. She shut the outer door after her without a sound and with great relief breathed in the fresh and faintly smoky air of morning.

She walked quickly. The windows of her house still overlooked her, and her greatest terror was that some voice, some appearance, out of that house, might command her return. The street was nearly empty. A maid scrubbing down steps looked after her sharply, and she wondered if she had been recognized. She had no intention of keeping to this street, or even taking a car and traveling down its broad, gray

and gleaming vista of formal houses and formal gardens that she knew and that knew her so well. It was a cross-town car bound for quite another locality that she climbed aboard. It was filled only with mechanics and workmen with picks and shovels. She sat crowded elbow to elbow among odors of stale tobacco, stale garlic, stale perspiration, and looking straight before her through the car window watched the aspect of the city, still gray, grow less gleaming and formal and finally quite dirty, and quite, quite dull.

This was all as she had intended, very much in the direction of her errand, and safe. But in Market Street the car-line ended, and she was turned out again in this broad artery of commerce where she was in danger of meeting at any moment people she knew. She made straight across the thoroughfare to its south side, turned down Eighteenth and in a moment was hidden in Mission Street.

Now really the worst danger of detection was over. She saw no reason why a woman with

a small hat and a hand-bag should not pass for a school-teacher. Indeed, the men did let her go at that, but the women—women with shawls over their heads, and women with uncovered heads and ear-rings in their ears, and thin, weak-eyed women with bags in their hands—the teachers themselves, one of whom she hoped to pass for—all stared at her. It didn't matter much, she thought, whether they thought her queer or not since they couldn't stop her.

She went, glancing at windows as she passed, looking for a place where she could go to breakfast. She turned into the first restaurant that offered, and after a hasty glance around it to be sure no one lurked there that might betray her she subsided into the clatter with relief. It was one more place to let time pass in, for it would be full two hours before she could fulfil her errand. She stayed as long as she dared, drinking two cups of the hideous coffee; stayed while many came and went, until she felt the proprietor noticing her. That revived her consciousness of the possible dangers still between

her and the end she held in view. She had heard of people being arrested for suspicious conduct. She didn't feel sure in what this might consist, but surely such an appearance could be avoided by walking fast and seeming to know exactly where one was going.

It was ten o'clock in the morning, three hours since she had left her house and a most reasonable time of daylight, when Flora turned out of the flatness of "south of Market Street" and began to mount a slow-rising hill. It was a wooden sidewalk she followed flanking a wood-paved street, and these, with the wooden fences and dusty cypress hedges and the houses peering over them upon her looked worn, battered and belonging all to the past. None the less it bore traces of having been a dignified past, and farther up on the crown of the hill among deep-bosomed trees, two or three large mansions wore the gravely triumphant aspect of having been brought successfully from a past empire into a present with all their traditions and mahogany complete. Upward toward these Flora

was looking. Her breath was short from fast climbing. Her cheeks under her thin veil were hot and bright.

As she neared the hilltop she glanced at a card from her chatelaine, consulting the address upon it. Then anxiously she scanned the house-fronts. It was not this one, nor this; but the square white mansion she came to now stood so far retired at the end of its lawn that she could not make out the number. As she peered a young girl came down the steps between the dark wings of the cypress hedge, a slim, fair, even-gaited creature dressed for the street and drawing on her gloves. As she passed Flora made sure she had seen her before. There was something familiar in the carriage of the girl's head and hands; something also like a pale reflection of another presence. Pale as it was, it was enough to reassure her that this was the house she wanted.

She ascended the steps beneath the arch of cypress and immediately found herself entering an atmosphere quieter even than that of the little

street below. It was quiet with the quiet of protectedness, as if some one brooding, vigilant care encircled it, defending it against all inroads of violent action and thought. It had been long since any young girl had carried such a heart of passionate hopes and fears up this mossed path between these peaceful flower-beds.

This appearance of the place began to bring before Flora the full enormity and impertinence of her errand, but though her heart beat on her side as loud as the brass knocker upon the door, she had no mind for turning back.

A high, cool, darkly gleaming interior, mellow with that precious tint of time which her own house so lacked, received her. And here, as well as out of doors, all the while she sat waiting she felt that protected peace was still the deity of the place. To Flora's eager heart time was streaming by, but the tall clock facing her measured it out slowly. Its longest golden finger had pointed out five minutes before the sweeping of a skirt coming down the hall brought her to her feet.

Mrs. Herrick came in hatless, a honeysuckle leaf caught in her gray crown of hair, geraniums in her hand. Flora had never seen her so informal and so gay.

"I would have asked you to come out into the garden, except that it's so wet, and there's no place to sit," she said.

Flora apologized. "I knew if I came at this hour I should interrupt you, but really there was no help for it." She glanced down at her satchel. "I had to go this morning, and before I went I had to see you about the house. I'm going down to look at it and—and to stop a while."

Mrs. Herrick hesitated, deprecated. "But you know Mrs. Britton wasn't satisfied with the price I asked."

"Oh," said Flora promptly, "but I shall be perfectly satisfied with it, and I want to take possession at once."

The positive manner in which she waved Clara out of her way brought up in Mrs. Herrick's face a faint flash of surprise; but it was gone in an instant, supplanted by her question-

ing puzzled consideration of the main proposition.

"Oh, I hope you haven't come to tell me you want it changed," she protested. "You know it's quite absurd in places—quite terrible indeed. It's 1870 straight through, and French at that; but even such whims acquire a dignity if they've been long cherished. You couldn't put in or take out one thing without spoiling the whole character."

"But I don't want to change it, I want it just as it is," Flora explained. "It isn't about the house itself I've come, it's about going down there. You see there are—some people, some friends of mine. I haven't promised them to show the house, but I have quite promised myself to show it to them, and they are only here for a few days more. They are going immediately." She was looking at Mrs. Herrick all the while she was telling her wretched lie, and now she even managed to smile at her. "I thought how lovely it would be if you could go there with me. I should like so very much to be in

it first with you, to have you go over it with me and tell me how to take care of it, as it's always been done. I should hate to do it any disrespect."

Her hostess smiled with ready answer. "Of course I will go down. I should be glad, but it must be in a day or two. Indeed, perhaps it would be better for you to have your people first, and I can come down, say Monday afternoon or Tuesday."

Flora faced this unexpected turn of the matter a little blankly. "Ah, but the trouble is I can't go down alone."

It was Mrs. Herrick's turn to look blank. "But Mrs. Britton?"

"Mrs. Britton isn't going with me; she can't."

"I see." Mrs. Herrick with a long, soft scrutiny seemed to be taking in more than Flora's mere words represented. "And you wouldn't put it off until she can?"

"I couldn't put it off a moment," Flora ended with a little breathless laugh. "I do so wish

you would come down with me this morning, for I must go, and you see I can't go alone."

Mrs. Herrick, sitting there, composed, in her cool, flowing, white and violet gown with the red flowers in her lap, still looked at Flora inquiringly. "But aren't there some women in your party old enough to make it possible and young enough to take pleasure in it?"

Flora shook her head. "Oh, no," she said. Her house of cards was tottering. She could not keep up her brave smiling. She knew her distress must be plain. Indeed, as she looked at Mrs. Herrick she saw the effect of it. Gaiety still looked at her out of that face, but the warmth, the spontaneity were gone; and the steady eyes, if anything so aloof could be suspicious, surely suspected her.

Her heart sank. If only she had told the truth—even so much of it as to say there was something she could not tell. What she had said was unworthy not only of herself but of the end she was so desperately holding out for. Now in the lucid gaze confronting her she knew

all her intentions were taking on a dubious color, stained false, like her words, under the dark cloud of her own misrepresentation. Yet they were not false, she knew. Her motives, the end she was struggling for, were as austere as truth itself. She could not give up without one bold stroke to clear them of this accusation.

"Do you think there's anything queer about it?" she faltered.

"Queer?" To Flora's ears that sounded the coldest word she had ever heard. "I hardly think I understand what you mean."

"I mean is it that you think there's more in what I'm asking of you than I have said?" The two looked at each other and before that flat question Mrs. Herrick drew back a little in her chair.

"I have no right to think about it at all," she said.

"Well, there is," Flora insisted. "There's a great deal more. I am sorry. I should have told you, but I was afraid. I don't know why

I was afraid of you, except that in this matter I've grown afraid of every one. It's true that there may be people going down—at least, a person. But it isn't, as I let you think it, a house party at all. It's for something, something that I can't do any other way—something," she had a sudden flash of insight, "that, if I could tell you, you would believe in, too."

Mrs. Herrick's look had faded to a mere concentrated attention. "You mean that there is something you wish to do for whoever is going down?"

"Oh, something I must do," Flora insisted.

Mrs. Herrick considered a moment. "Why can't he do it for himself?" she threw out suddenly.

It made Flora start, but she met it gallantly. "Because he won't. I shall have to make him."

"You!" For a moment Flora knew that she was preposterous in Mrs. Herrick's eyes—and then that she was pathetic. Her companion was looking at her with a sad sort of humor.

"My dear, are you sure that that is your responsibility?"

Flora's answering smile was faint. "It seems as strange to me as it seems absurd to you, but I think I have done something already."

"Are you sure, or has he only let you think so? We have all at some time longed, or even thought it was our duty, to adjust something when it would have been safer to have kept our hand off," Mrs. Herrick went on gently.

"Oh, safer," Flora breathed. "Oh, yes; indeed, I know. But if something had been put into your hands without your choice; if all the life of some one that you cared about depended on you, would you think of being *safe?*" Flora, leaning forward, chin in hand, with shining eyes, seemed fairly to impart a reflection of her own passionate concentration to the woman before her.

Mrs. Herrick, so calm in her reposeful attitude, calm as the old portrait on the wall behind her, none the less began to show a curious sparkle of excitement in her face. "If I were

sure that person's life *did* depend on me," she measured out her words deliberately. "But that so seldom happens, and it is so hard to tell."

"But if you were sure, sure, sure!" Flora rang it out certainly.

Mrs. Herrick in her turn leaned forward. "Ah, even then it would depend on him. And do you think you can make a man do otherwise than his nature?"

"You think I should fail?" Flora took it up fearlessly. "Well, if I do, at least I shall have done my best. I shall have to have done my best or I can never forgive myself."

"I see," Mrs. Herrick sighed. "But it sounds to me a risk too great for any reward that could come of its success." She thought. "If you could tell me more." Then, as Flora only looked at her wistfully and silently: "Isn't there some one you can confide in? Not Mrs. Britton?"

"Clara? Oh, no; never!" Flora startled Mrs. Herrick with the passionate repudiation.

"But could not Mr. Cressy—" and with that

broken sentence several things that Mrs. Herrick had been keeping back looked out of her face.

Flora answered with a stare of misery. "I know what you must be thinking—what you can not help thinking," she said, "that the whole thing is unheard-of—outrageous—especially for a girl so soon to—to be—" She caught her breath with a sob, for the words she could not speak. "But there is nothing in this disloyal to my engagement, even though I can not speak of it to Harry Cressy; and nothing I hope to gain for myself by what I am trying to do. If I succeed it will only mean I shall never see him —the other one—again."

Mrs. Herrick rose, in her turn beseeching. "Oh, I can't help you go into it! It is too dubious. My dear, I know so much better than you what the end may mean."

"I know what the end may mean, and I can't keep out of it."

"But I can not go with you." There was a stern note in Mrs. Herrick's voice.

Flora looked around the room, the sunny windows, the still shadows, the tall, monotonous clock, as if this were the last glimpse of peace and protection she would ever have. She rose and put out her hand.

"I'm afraid I didn't quite realize how much I was asking of you. You have been very good even to listen to me. It's right, I suppose, that I should go alone."

Mrs. Herrick looked at her in dismay. "But that is impossible!" Then, as Flora turned away, she kept her hand. "Think, think," she urged, "how you will be misunderstood."

"Oh, I shall have to bear that—from the people who don't know."

"Yes, and even from the one for whom you are spending yourself!"

Flora gave her head a quick shake. "He understands," she said.

"My dear, he is not worth it."

Flora turned on her with anger. "You don't know what he is worth to me!"

Mrs. Herrick looked steadily at this unan-

swerable argument. Her hold on Flora's hand relaxed, but she did not quite release it. Her brows drew together. "You are quite sure you must go?"

Flora nodded. She was speechless.

"Did Mrs. Britton know you were coming to me?"

"No. She doesn't even know that I am going out of town. She must not," Flora protested.

"Indeed she must. You must not place yourself in such a false position. Write her and tell her you are going to San Mateo with me."

"Oh, if you would!" Tears sprang to Flora's eyes. "But will you, even if I can't tell you anything?"

"I shall not ask you anything. Now write her immediately. You can do it here while I am getting ready."

She had taken authoritative command of the details of their expedition, and Flora willingly obeyed her. She was still trembling from the stress of their interview, and she blinked back

tears before she was able to see what she was writing.

It had all been brought about more quickly and completely than she had hoped, but it was in her mind all the while she indited her message to Clara, that Kerr, for whom it had been accomplished, was not yet informed of the existence of the scheme, or the part of guest he was to play. Yet she was sure that if she asked he would be promptly there. She wrote to him briefly:

At San Mateo, at the Herricks'. I want you there to-night. I have made up my mind.

As she was sealing it she started at a step approaching in the hall. She had wanted to conceal that betraying letter before Mrs. Herrick came back. She glanced quickly behind her, and saw standing between the half-open folding doors, the slim figure of a girl—slimmer, younger even than the one who had passed her at the gate, but like her, with the same large eyes, the same small indeterminate chin. Just at the chin the likeness to Mrs. Herrick failed

with the strength of her last generation—but the eyes were perfect; and they gazed at Flora wondering. With the sixth sense of youth they recognized the enactment of something strange and thrilling.

Another instant and Mrs. Herrick's presence dawned behind her daughter—and her voice—"Why, child, what are you doing there?"—and her hands seemed apprehensive in their haste to hurry the child away, as if, truly, in this drawing-room, for the first time, something was dangerous.

XXI

THE HOUSE OF QUIET

THE day which had dawned so still and gloomy was wakening to something like wildness, threatening, brightening, gusty, when they stepped out of the train upon the platform of the San Mateo station. Clouds were piling gray and castle-like from the east up toward the zenith, and dark fragments kept tearing off the edges and spinning away across the sky. But between them the bright face of the sun flashed out with double splendor, and the thinned atmosphere made the sky seem high and far, and all form beneath it clarified and intense.

There upon the narrow platform Mrs. Herrick hesitated a moment, looking at Flora. "What train do you want to meet?" she asked.

Flora stood perplexed. "I hardly know. You see I can't tell how soon my letter would reach —would be received."

"Then we would better meet them all," the elder woman decided.

They drove away into the face of the wet, fresh wind and flying drops of rain. Flora, leaning back in the carriage, looked out through the window with quiet eyes. The spirited movement of the sky, the racing of its shadows on the grass, the rolling foliage of the trees, seen tempestuous against flying cloud, were alike to her consoling and inspiring. She had never felt so free as now, driving through the fitful weather, nor so safe as with this companion who was sitting silent by her side. She was driving away from all her complications. She was retreating to a fresh stronghold, where her conflict would be a duel hand to hand, and where the outside forces, which had harassed her and threatened ignobly to down her antagonist with a stab in the back, could be held at bay.

Already she was looking toward the house

which she had never seen as her own kindly castle; and the generous opening of its gate—old granite crowned with rose of sharon—did not disappoint her. The house was hidden in the swelling trees, but the drive winding beneath them gave glimpses through of lawns, of roses wreathing scarletly the old gray fountain basin, of magnolia and acacia, doubly delicate and white and fragile beneath the thunderous sky.

The house, when finally it loomed upon them, with its irregular roofs topped by curious square turrets, with its tremendous ground floor rambling away in wings on every side, with its deep upper and lower verandas, looked out upon by a multitude of long French windows, seemed too large, too strangely imposing for a structure of wood. But whatever of original ugliness had been there was hidden now under a splendid tapestry of vines, and Flora, looking up at the rose and honeysuckle that panoplied its front, felt her throat swell for sheer delight.

For a moment after they had left the carriage they stood together in the porte-cochère,

looking around them. Then half wistfully, half humorously, Mrs. Herrick turned to Flora. "I do hope you won't want to buy it!"

"Oh, I'm afraid I shall," Flora murmured, "that is, if—" She left her sentence hanging, as one who would have said "if I come out of this alive," and Mrs. Herrick, with a quick start of protection, laid her hand on Flora's arm.

"If you must," she said lightly, "if you do buy it, then at least I shall know it is in good hands."

Flora gave her a look of gratitude, not so much for the slight kindness of her words as for the great kindness of her attitude in thus so readily resuming the first assumption on which her presence there had been invited. That was the house itself.

It was plain to Flora from the moment she set foot over the threshold that the house was to be no mean ally of theirs, but Mrs. Herrick was making it help them doubly in their hard interval of waiting. Alone together with unspoken, unspeakable things between them—

things that for mere decency or honor could not be uttered—with nothing but these to think of, nothing but each other to look at, they must yet, in sheer desperation and suspense, have inevitably burst out with question or confession, had not the great house been there to interpose its personality. And the way Mrs. Herrick was making the most of that! The way immediately, even before she had shown anything, she began to revivify the spirit of the place, as the two women stood with their hats not yet off in the room that was to be Flora's, talking and looking out upon the lawn!

With her silences, with her expressive self as well as with her words, Mrs. Herrick was reanimating it all the while they lunched and rested, still in the upper-rooms overlooking the garden. And later, when they made the tour of the house, she began unwinding from her memory incidents of its early beginnings, pieces of its intimate, personal history, as one would make a friend familiar to another friend. And these past histories and the rooms themselves were leading

Flora away out of her anxious self, were soothing her prying apprehensions, were giving her a detachment in the present, till what she so anticipated lay quiescent at the back of her brain.

But it was there. And now and then, when in a gust of wind the lights and shadows danced on the dim, polished floors, it stirred; and at the sound of wheels on the drive below it leaped, and all her fears again were in her face. At such moments the two women did look deeply at each other, and the suspense, the premonition, hovered in Mrs. Herrick's eyes. It was as unconscious, as involuntary, as Flora's start at the swinging of a door; but no question crossed her lips. She let the matter as severely alone as if it had been a jewel not her own. Yet, it came to Flora all at once that here, for the first time, she was with one to whom she could have revealed the sapphire on her neck and yet remain unchallenged.

"Ah, you're too lovely!" she burst out at last. "It is more than I deserve that you should

take it all like this, as if there really wasn't anything." The elder lady's eyes wavered a little at the plain words.

"I'm too deeply doubtful of it to take it any other way," she said.

"That is why I feel most guilty," Flora explained. "For dragging you into it and then —bringing it into your house." She glanced around at the high, quiet, damasked room. "Such a thing to happen here!"

"Ah, my dear,"—Mrs. Herrick's laugh was uncertain—"the things that have happened here —the things that have happened and been endured and been forgotten! and see," she said, laying her hand on one of the walls, "the peace of it now!"

Flora wondered. She seemed to feel such distances of life extending yet beyond her sight as dwindled her, tiny and innocent.

"It isn't what happens, but the way we take it that makes the afterward," Mrs. Herrick added.

The thought of an afterward had stood very

dim in Flora's mind, and even now that Mrs. Herrick's words confronted her with it she couldn't fancy what it would be like. She couldn't imagine her existence going on at all on the other side of failure.

"But suppose," she tremulously urged, "suppose there seemed only one way to take what had happened to you, and that way, if it failed, would leave you no afterward at all, no peace, no courage, nothing."

Mrs. Herrick's eyes fixed her with their deep pity and their deeper apprehension. "There are few things so bad as that," she said slowly, "and those are the ones we must not touch."

Flora paused a moment on the brink of her last plunge. "Do you think what I am going to do is such a thing as that?"

"Oh, my poor child, how do I know? I hope, I pray it is not!" Her fingers closed on Flora's hand, and the girl clung to the kind grasp. It was a comfort, though it could not save her from the real finality.

In spite of the consciousness of a friendly

presence in the house her fears increased as the afternoon waned, and her thoughts went back to what she had left behind her, and forward to what might be coming—the one person whom she so longed for, and so dreaded to see. He might be on his way now. He might at this moment be hurrying down the hedged lane from the station; and when he should come, and when they two were face to face, there would be no other "next time" for them. Everything was crystalizing, getting hard. Everything was getting too near the end to be malleable any more. It was her last chance to make him relinquish his unworthy purpose; perhaps his last chance to save himself from captivity. She found she hadn't a thing left unsaid, an argument left unused. What could she do that she had not done before, except to show him by just being here, accessible and ready to serve him at any risk, how much she cared? Could his generosity resist that?

Beyond the fact of getting him away safe she didn't think. Beyond that nothing looked

large to her, nothing looked definite. The returning of the sapphire itself seemed simple beside it, and the fact that her position in the matter might never be explained of no importance.

Now while every moment drew her nearer her greatest moment she grew more absent, more strained, more restless, more intently listening, more easily starting at the lightest sound; until, at last, when the late day touched the rooms with fiery sunset colors, her friend, watchful of her changing mood, ready at every point to palliate circumstance, drew her out into the garden.

The wind, which had fallen with approaching evening, was only a whisper among the trees. The greenish-white bodies of statues in the shrubbery glowed ruddy. Gathering their skirts from the grass that glittered with the drops of the last shower, arm in arm the two women walked down the broad central gravel drive between ribbon beds of flowers. From here numerous paths paved with white stone went wandering under snowball trees and wild apple,

losing themselves in shrubbery. But one made a clear turn across the lawn for the rose-garden, where in the midst a round pool of water lay like a flaming bit of the sunset sky. Among the bushes red and rose and white, the elder woman in her black, the younger in her gown more glowing, with a veil over her hair, walked, and, loitering, looked down into the water, seeing their faces reflected, and, behind, the tangled brambles and the crimson sky. They did not speak, but at last their companionship was peaceful, was perfect. The only sounds were the sleepy notes of birds and that faint, high whisper of the tree tops on an evening that is not still.

Loud and shrill and shriller and more piercing, from the west wing of the house, overhanging the garden, the sound reached them—an alarum that set Flora's heart to leaping. Startled apart, they listened.

"Would that be—is that for you?"

"I think it's for me."

The words came from them simultaneously, and almost at the same instant Flora had started

across the lawn. The sight of an aproned maid coming out on the veranda and peering down the garden set her running fleetly.

"It's a telephone for Miss Gilsey," the girl said.

"Oh, thank you," Flora panted.

She knew so well the voice she had expected at the other end of the wire that the husky, boyish note which reached her, attenuated by distance, struck her with dismay and disappointment.

"Ella, oh, yes; yes; Ella." What was she saying? Ella was using the telephone as if it were a cabinet for secrets.

"Clara told me you were down there," she was explaining. "I saw her this morning, yes. Well,"—and she could hear Ella draw in her breath—"I'm so relieved! I thought you'd be, too, to know. I *was* perfectly right. She was after him."

Flora faltered, "After whom?" There flashed through her mind more than one person that, by this time, Clara might possibly be after.

"Why, after papa, of course!" Ella's injured surprise brought her back to the romance of Judge Buller. Her voice rose in sheer bewilderment. "Well?"

Ella's voice rose triumphantly. "I got it out of her myself. I just came right out to her at last. She seemed awfully surprised that I knew; but she owned up to it, and what do you think? I bought her off!"

"Bought her off?" Flora cried. Each fact that Ella brought forth seemed to her more preposterous than the last.

"Why, yes, it's too ridiculous; what do you think she wanted?"

At that question Flora's heart seemed fairly to stand still. That was the very question she had been asking herself for days, and asking in vain.

Ella's voice was coming to her faint as a voice from another world. "She wanted that little, little picture—that picture of the man called Farrell Wand. Don't you remember, papa mentioned it at supper that evening at the club?

Isn't it funny she remembered it all this time? Well, she wanted it dreadfully, but Harry wanted it, too, and papa said he had promised it to Harry; but I got it first and gave it to her." Ella's voice ended on a high note of triumph.

Flora's, if anything, rose higher in despair. "Oh, Ella!"

"Doesn't it seem ridiculous," Ella argued, "that if she really wanted him she'd give him up for that?"

"Oh, no—I mean yes," Flora stammered. "Yes, of course! thank you, Ella, very much—very much." The last words were hardly audible. The receiver fell jangling into its bracket, and Flora leaned against the wall by the telephone and closed her eyes.

For a moment all she could see was Clara with that little, little picture. How well she could remember how Clara had looked that night of the club supper!

From the moment Judge Buller had spoken of the picture, how all three of them had

changed, Clara and Kerr and Harry. Everything that had seemed so phantasmal then, everything she had put down as a figment of her own imagination, had meant just this plain fact. All three of them had wanted the picture. For his own reason Kerr had turned aside from the chase, but Harry had stood with it to the last, and now, when finally the prize had been assured to him, Clara had it!

At this moment she had it in her hand. At this moment she knew what was the aspect of the figure in the picture, whether it showed a face, and, if a face, whose. Flora's hands opened and closed. "Oh," she whispered to the great silence of the great house awaiting him; "where is he? Why isn't he here?"

All those terrible things which might be happening beyond her reach processioned before her. Had Clara already snapped the trap of the law upon Kerr? And if she hadn't yet, what could be done to hold her off? Flora turned again to the telephone. Slowly she took down the receiver and gave into the bright

mouthpiece of the instrument the number of her own house.

Presently the voice of Shima spoke to her. Mrs. Britton had gone out to dinner.

"Tell her, Shima," Flora commanded, "tell her to come down on the earliest train." She hesitated, then finished in a firm voice. "Tell her not to do anything until she has seen me."

Shima would tell her—but Mrs. Britton had been out all day. He did not know when she would be back.

The words sounded ominous in Flora's ears. She turned away. Was everything to be finished just as she had light enough to move, but before she had a chance?

The sound of spinning wheels on the drive startled her to fresh hope, and sent her hurrying down the stair. It was the phaëton returning from the last train. Through the open door she saw the figure of Mrs. Herrick expectant on the veranda. Then the carriage came into the porte-cochère and passed. With a rush she reached the veranda, and stood there looking after it. She

wouldn't believe her eyes—she couldn't—that it had returned again empty.

Mrs. Herrick's voice was asking her, "What shall we do? Shall we serve dinner now, or wait a little longer?"

"Oh, it's no use," Flora murmured, "he won't come to-night. He'll never come." She drooped against the tall porch pillar.

"My poor child!" Mrs. Herrick took her passive hand. If she read in the profound discouragement of Flora's face that something more had transpired than a mere non-appearance, she did not show it, but waited, alert and quiet, while they gazed together out over the darkening garden.

It was the time of twilight when the sky is so much brighter than the earth. Across the lawns between the bushes from hedge to hedge the veil of the obscuring light was coming in; and through it the avenue of willows marched darkly. Their leaves moved a little. Flora watched the ripple of their tops, clear on the bright sky, and deeper down among mysterious

branches there was a sense of movement where the eyes could not see. There was a curious flick, flick, flicker—a progression, a passing from the far dark end of the willow avenue toward where it met the vista of the drive. Flora's eyes, absently, involuntarily, followed the movement. She felt Mrs. Herrick's hand suddenly close on hers.

"Is some one coming?"

They clung to each other, peering timorously down the drive. A little gust of wind took the garden, and before the trees had ceased to tremble and whiten a man had emerged from their shadow and was advancing upon them up the middle of the drive.

Flora's heart leaped at sight of him. All her impulse was to fly to meet him, but she felt Mrs. Herrick's hand tighten upon her wrist as if it divined her madness.

His light stick aswing in his hand, his step free and incautious as ever, gray and slender and seeming to look more at the ground than at them, the two women watched him drawing

near. His was the seeming of a quiet guest at the quietest of house parties. To meet him Flora saw she must meet him on the high ground of his reserve. As he came under the light of the porte-cochère his look, his greeting, his hand, were first for Mrs. Herrick.

"We were afraid we had missed you altogether," said she.

"It was I who somehow missed your carriage, was hardly expecting to be expected at such an hour."

Flora watched them meeting each other so gallantly with a trembling compunction. Mrs. Herrick, who trusted her, was giving her hand in sublime ignorance. It was vain that Flora told herself she had given warning. She knew she had thrown the softening veil of her spiritual crisis over the ugly material fact. Had she said, "I want you to uphold me while I meet a thief whom I love and wish to protect. He's magnificent in all other ways except for this one obsession," she knew Mrs. Herrick simply would have cried, "Impossible, outrageous!" Yet

there they stood together, and as Flora looked at them she could not have told which was of the finer temper. Kerr's bearing was so unruffled that it seemed as if he had flown too high to feel the storm Flora was passing through. But when he turned toward her, in spite of himself, there was eagerness in his manner. He looked questioningly at her, as if no time had intervened, as if a moment before he had said to her through the carriage window, "I will give you twenty-four hours," and now her time had come to speak.

Only the thought that time was crowding him into a bag's end gave her courage to vow she would speak that night. Yet not now, while they stood just met in the deepening dusk, in the sweet breath of the early flowers; nor later when they passed in friendly fashion, the three of them, through fairy labyrinths of arch and mirror, into the long, high, glistening room, whose round table, spread, seemed dwarfed to mushroom height; nor yet, while this semblance of companionship was between them, and the

great proportions of the place lifting oppression, left them as unconscious of walls and roof as though they were met in the open. The clock twice marked the passing hour. She had never heard Mrs. Herrick speak so flowingly nor Kerr listen so well, placing his questions nicely to draw out the thread of her theme. Yet Flora guessed his thought must be fixed on their approaching moment, as hers was—on the moment when they should be ready to quit the table and Mrs. Herrick would leave them to themselves.

It was the appearance of the aproned maid that broke their unity. The last course was on the table, the last taste of its pungent fruit essence on their tongues—and what was the girl's errand now? The eye of her mistress was inquiring.

"Some one has come, Mrs. Herrick." The woman's proper formula seemed to fail her. She looked as if she had been frightened.

"Some one?" Mrs. Herrick showed asperity. "What name?"

"He is coming in." As she spoke the girl shrank a little to one side.

With his long coat open, hanging from the armpits, with ruffled hair, and lips apart, and from breathlessness a little smiling, Harry appeared in the doorway. Kerr leaned forward. Mrs. Herrick did not move. She was facing the last arrival and she was smiling more flexibly, more naturally, than Harry; but it was Flora who found the first word.

"You! I—I thought it was Clara." She was struggling for nonchalance, for poise, at this worst blow, so unexpected.

"Clara won't be down," Harry said, advancing. "How d'ye do, Mrs. Herrick? How d'ye do, Kerr?"

"How d'ye do?" said the Englishman, without rising.

Flora gripped the arms of her chair to keep from springing up in sheer nervous terror. A possible purpose in Harry's coming, that even Mrs. Herrick's presence would not defer, shot through her mind. Was he alone? Or were

there others—men here for a fearful purpose —waiting beyond in the hall? But Harry had turned his back upon the door behind him with a finality that declared whatever danger had come into the house was complete in his presence.

"I've dined, thanks," he said, but, stripping off his greatcoat, accepted a chair and the glass of cordial Mrs. Herrick offered him. The ruddy, hard quality of his face, were it divested of its present smile, Flora thought, might well have frightened the maid; but, for all that, it was not so implacable as Kerr's face confronting it. The look with which he met the intrusion had a quality more bitter than the challenge of an antagonist, more jealous than a mere lover's; and that bitterness, that jealousy which was between them came out stingingly through their small pleasantness. It could not be, Flora thought in terror, that Mrs. Herrick intended to leave these two enemies to each other! Mrs. Herrick had risen; and Flora, following, saw both men, also uprisen, hang hesitatingly, as

if unready to be deserted; yet with well-filled glasses, and newly smoking tobacco, both were caught.

Then Kerr, with a quick dash of his hand, picked up his glass. "Let us be Continental," he begged, and followed close at Flora's side. Without moving his lips Kerr was speaking. "What does this mean?"

She sensed the anger in his smothered voice, but she dared not look at him.

"I have no idea; but I will see you."

"When?"

Her answer leaped to her mind and her lips at the same moment.

"In the rotunda when the house is quiet."

Harry had followed leisurely in their wake. The flush of haste had subsided in his face, and when the four regrouped themselves in the high, darkly-paneled room, among the low lights, Flora remarked his extraordinary composure. Bitter he might be; but all the nervousness, suspicion, uneasiness, that he had shown of late had

vanished. There was a tremendous confidence about him, the confidence of the player who holds cards that must win the game, and sits back waiting for his moment.

But she was ready to laugh at him in his security. He had underestimated his opponent. In spite of him she was to have her meeting with Kerr! Harry had waited too long to prevent that, whatever he might do afterward. In this inspired moment she felt herself touching conquering heights which before she had only touched in imagination. She felt enough power in herself to move even such a mountain of obstinacy as Kerr. She stole a look at him—a look of glad intelligence. He understood as if she had spoken. They were to meet, while all the house slept fast, to meet for his great renunciation. Then, in the morning, when Harry was ready with whatever move he was holding back, Kerr would be gone. There would be no Kerr—but she must not think of that! She glanced at him again in the thick of the talk,

and caught his eye upon her, puzzled, and, she thought, with a glimmer of doubt.

She smiled; and smiled again at the ease with which she reassured him, merely by looking at him. He should see, in the end, how true she could be!

He was talking tremendously, flinging off fireworks of words, but she was curiously aware that Mrs. Herrick and Harry were looking more at her than at Kerr. She felt herself the dominant spirit. She saw them acknowledge it, swept along by the high tide of her mood that was rising to meet her great decisive moment. Yet on the surface the strong pulse of it appeared as ripples—words, smiles, gay gestures, laughter—rising like the last bubble on a wave's crest. She was not consciously acting; she was inspired by the power of what she concealed and must conceal. And when she left them it was like a triumphant exit; almost it seemed to her as if she might hear their applause following her.

In the room where, some eight hours before, she and Mrs. Herrick had talked, Flora waited,

fully dressed. It had been early when they had separated. The strain of the four together had been terrific; and she was still feeling it, though an hour had passed. She was feeling that, now her situation was upon her, she was alone. Mrs. Herrick could only be near her, not with her, and Kerr was still an unknown quantity—except that he was fire.

And there was Harry, with his terrible certainty, and no apparent thing to account for it. It could not be there were men in the house without the servants remarking it; but in the garden? She peered out upon it. Only tree shadows moved upon the lawn. Nothing glimmered in the walks or drives. The solitude held her like an enchantment. She listened for the small sounds in the house to cease, for the lights in the lower story to go out, proclaiming all the servants were in bed. Even after the stillness she waited—waited to be sure it was the long stillness.

Finally she crept to the door and opened it boldly wide.

She stood where she was upon the threshold trembling in a cruel fright. A gas-jet burning far up at the end of the hall, threw a dim light down the pale, pinkish, naked vista, void of furniture, window or curtain; and, leaning against the blank wall almost opposite her door, and directly facing her, was Harry.

Without speaking they looked at each other. He was fully dressed, but lacking his shoes, as she noted in the acuteness of her startled senses. The furtive suggestion of those shoeless feet struck her with horror—formless, unreasoning. It was like an evil dream to find him there, stolen to her door in the night, waiting outside it without a sound, looking her steadily, hardily in the eye without a word.

She tried to speak, but, with terror sobbing in her throat, the words failed. She made a step forward with a crazy impulse to rush past him.

He straightened, with a quick movement toward her. She recoiled before him, precipitately retreated, closed the door, shot the bolt,

and leaned, for faintness, against the wall. She expected each moment to hear him tap. She neither heard a knock nor the sound of soft, departing feet. He was still there! He was on guard! He had had good reason for his terrible certainty! He had foreseen what her plan might be, and she knew he would no more let her get past him down the hall than the turnkey will let the wretched prisoner escape.

The last flicker of her courage died at that thought. All her fine exultation was beaten out by the fact of the brute force outside her door. She could not get to Kerr now. Cowering behind her door she could only fancy him waiting for her in the rotunda while the moments lengthened into hours, each moment distrusting her more.

XXII

CLARA'S MARKET

ALL night she sat awake huddled under her greatcoat in the chilly darkness. She could not lie down, she could not close her eyes. At long intervals she heard the tread of unshod feet along the hall, and then she held her breath lest at her slightest stir they approach her door. Why, since he wanted the sapphire, hadn't he tried to get it from her when he had had her unawares, upon her threshold with the house asleep? It began to seem to her as if he were waiting, as if he were forced to wait, for some appointed moment. She knew if it were his moment it would be hers, too, as long as she had the sapphire upon her. She recalled fearfully the moment when she had crouched against the window with her hand pro-

tecting the jewel, and Harry's hand grasping her wrist. He would know well enough where to find it now. Oh, the restless unconcealable thing! Where could she hide it?

She took the pear-shaped pouch that swung always before her on her long gold chain. She had repudiated that hiding-place before, but now, the more obvious the better—now that both men supposed she carried the jewel far hidden out of sight. Without moving from the bed where she was crouched, cramped and cold, she made the exchange, leaving the chain still around her neck, dropping the jewel into the pouch, where it would swing free, so carelessly dangling as to be beyond suspicion, but never beyond the reach of her hand.

It was a pale, splendid dawning full of clouds when she feel asleep.

Broad sunlight filled her room when she was awakened by a knocking at her door. She sprang from the bed and went to it. She was not to be come in upon by any unwelcome visitor. But it was Mrs. Herrick; and Flora, with a murmur of

relief, since this was the one person she did want to see, drew her inside.

"Why, my child, you haven't slept, at least not properly." Mrs. Herrick herself looked anxious and weary. "I've come to tell you that Mrs. Britton is here. She came an hour ago."

"Where is she?"

"In the breakfast-room with Mr. Cressy."

"Oh," Flora cried, "you know I didn't expect them. I didn't want them. It wasn't for them I asked you to come."

"But can't you tell me what it is you're afraid of?" the other urged. "Between us can't we prevent it? Is there nothing I can do to help you?"

"Ah, if you knew how much you have already helped me by just being here."

Her companion laughed a little. "Can't I do something more active than that?"

Flora pondered. "Where is Mr. Kerr?"

"In the garden, in the willow walk."

"Do you think you can manage that the others don't get at him?"

"I can; if he doesn't want to get at them," Mrs. Herrick replied. "Against a man like that, my dear," she aimed it gravely at Flora, "one can do nothing."

But Flora had no answer for the warning. "I must see Clara immediately," she said.

"But not without breakfast," Mrs. Herrick protested. "I will send you up something. Remember that *she* never abuses herself, so she's always fresh—and so she's always equal to the occasion."

Mrs. Herrick went. Flora looked into the mirror. Almost for the first time in ten days she thought of her appearance. If it was, as Mrs. Herrick said, a factor of success, something must be done for it, for it was dreadful. The best she could do revived a pale replica of the vivid creature who had been wont to regard her from her glass. Yet her black gown, thin and trailing far behind her, and her hair wound high, by very force of their contrasted color gave her a real brilliance as they gave her a seeming height. But she descended to the break-

fast-room with trepidation, and stood a full minute before the door gathering courage to go in.

When she did open it, it was so suddenly that both occupants faced her with a start. They were standing close together, and between them, on the glare of the white table-cloth, lay a little heap of gold. As they peered at her she saw that both were highly excited, but in Clara it showed like a cold sparkle; in Harry it gloomed like a menace. His hand hovered, clenched, above the money in a panic of irresolution; then, as if with an involuntary relax of nerves, opened and let fall one last piece of gold. Like a flash the whole disappeared in a sweep of Clara's hand. It passed before Flora's eyes like a prestidigitator's trick, so rapid as to seem unreal, and left her staring. Harry gave Clara a look, half suspicious, half entreating; and then, to Flora's astonishment, turned away without a word to either of them.

Clara stood still, even after the door had closed upon Harry, and oddly, and rather horridly, she wore the same aspect she had worn

the day when she had looked intently and absorbedly upon the rifled contents of Flora's room.

"Good morning," she said, and, pushing up her little misty veil, sat down with her back to the deserted breakfast table, and waited meekly, like one who has been summoned.

"I am very glad you've come," Flora said. Her wits were still all a-flutter from the appearance of that little heap of gold. She came forward and stood in Harry's place. She was face to face with the person and the question, but before the great import of it, and before the marble front of Clara's patience, she felt helpless. There was silence in the room, perfect silence in the garden; but moving along the hedged walk all at once she saw the flutter of Mrs. Herrick's gown, and then in profile Kerr beside her. The sight of him gave her her proper inspiration. She turned upon Clara.

"What are you going to do with the picture of Farrell Wand?"

For the first time she saw Clara startled. Her lips parted, and the breath that came and went

between them was audible. But she was herself again before she spoke. "Do with it? Why I don't know." Her fingers drummed the table.

"Whatever you do," Flora began, "please, oh, please don't do anything immediately."

Clara's eyebrows rose like graceful swallows. "You seem to anticipate pretty clearly what I *am* going to do."

"I suppose you're going to do what any one would who had a clue, and could bring a person to justice," Flora candidly responded. "But if ever I have made anything easy for you, Clara, won't you this time make it easy for me? I'm not asking you to give up the picture, I'm only asking you to wait."

Clara nodded toward the window, through which Kerr could still be seen with Mrs. Herrick. "On account of him?"

"On account of him."

For the first time Clara smiled. It crept out upon her face, as it were involuntarily, but she sat there smiling in contemplation for quite ten seconds. At last, "You want me to suppress my

information? My dear Flora, don't you think you want me to do more than is honest?"

"Honest!" Flora cried. The words sounded hideous to her on Clara's tongue; and yet what right had she, she thought with shame, to judge of Clara's honesty when she herself was leagued with a thief? "Clara," she said humbly, before this upholder of the right, "I can't pretend I'm not suppressing things. I've only asked you to see me before you do anything more. Now, you've come. Will you tell me one thing—did you bring the picture with you?"

Clara weighed it. "Well, if I did—"

This was the considering Clara, and Flora realized whatever she could expect from her she couldn't expect mercy. It was another thing she must appeal to.

"Clara," she urged, "wait three days, and you shall have the whole of it. You have only the picture now. You shall have the jewel, too. Then you can get the reward and still be—honest."

She let the word fall into the silence fearfully,

as if she were afraid Clara might detect its sneer. But this time Clara neither smiled nor frowned.

"It isn't the reward I'm thinking about. That's really very little, considering."

"Twenty thousand dollars!"

"Would that be much to you?"

"No," Flora admitted; "at least I mean I could pay it."

"Well, then," Clara triumphed, "why, the picture alone, if it's worth anything, is worth more than that." With a bird-like lifting of the head she gave a sidelong interrogative glance.

Flora, for a moment, steadily returned the look. It was coming over her what Clara meant; a meaning so simple it was absurd she had not thought of it before—so hateful that it was all she could do to face it. She felt a tightness in her throat that was not tears. Shame and anger contended in her. Oh, for the power to have refused that shameful bargain—to have scorned it! She turned away. She closed her eyes. In her mind she saw the figure of Kerr moving quietly about the winding walks with Mrs. Her-

rick. She faced sharply about. "What is it worth to you?"

Clara put her off with the last sweet meekness of her cleverness. "Whatever it's worth to you —and him."

Flora was in command of herself now. "There are some things I can not set a price on. If this is what you have come down for, we are simply waiting for you to name it." She looked over Clara's head. She had stood abashed when Clara had put on the majesty of right, but now it was Clara herself who was abashed, not at the thing itself, but at the fact of having to utter it. She sat grasping one of her gloves in her doubled fist; and, leaning forward, with her eyes like jewels in her little pale face and the white aura of her veil, waited as if she thought that by some silent agency of understanding Flora would presently take up a pen and write the desired figure in her check-book.

But Flora stood inexorable, straight and black, crowned with her helmet of gleaming hair; and, with her hands behind her, looked over

Clara's head through the window into the garden. She would not help Clara gloss over this ugly fact.

A curious grimace distorted Clara's features, as if with an effort she gulped something bitter, and then into the silence her voice fell—a gasp, a breath—"Fifty thousand."

All sums had become the same to Flora, even her year's income. As if she were verily afraid Clara might take it back, she turned precipitately to a writing-table. But Clara had risen, and though still pale, in a measure she seemed to have recovered herself.

"Wait. I can't give it to you now. I will meet you here in two hours and bring the picture. You can let me have it then."

"Oh, two hours!" Flora objected.

But Clara was firm. "No, I can't bring it sooner. It will make no difference in your affair." She was panting in her excitement. "In two hours you shall have the picture here. I promise you."

Flora wondered. Depth below depth! She

could never seem to get to the bottom of this business. There was only one thing she could count on, and that was Clara's impeccable honor in living up to a bargain. Flora sealed that bargain now. She held out her fluttering slip of paper, still wet with ink.

"Very well, in two hours—but take this now. I would rather you did."

Clara reached the tips of her fingers, touched the paper—and then it was no longer in Flora's hand, and Clara was walking from her across the room.

XXIII

TOUCHE

LEFT alone, Flora glanced rapidly around her. Now for a sally, now for a dash straight for Kerr. The shortest way was what she wanted. Opening doors lately had led to too many surprises. She pushed aside the long curtains and stepped out through the French window upon the veranda. Rapidly her eyes swept the garden. Far down between the gray, slim branches of willows at last she made out the flutter of a skirt. She sighed relief to think Mrs. Herrick still at her post, and began to hurry down the broad unshaded drive. Her steps sounded loud on the gravel, and presently to her excited ears they sounded double. Then she realized the truth. Some one else was walking behind her. She thought by not looking over her

shoulder she could avoid stopping; but in a moment Harry's voice hailed her. It was still far enough behind for her to hope she could ignore it. She swept on as if she had not heard. Once around the turn of the drive, she would be in sight of succor. She could trust to Mrs. Herrick to manage Harry. She made a little rush around the loop and looked down the long vista of the willows.

A hundred yards distant she saw the two standing. Kerr presented his back, and with his head a little canted forward seemed to listen, absorbed in his companion. But that companion was a smaller figure than Mrs. Herrick, and her veil made an aura of filmy white around her face. The sight of her was enough to stop Flora short, and in that instant Harry, making a cut across the flower-beds, caught up with her. He stopped as abruptly as she, and gazed with a dismay that surpassed her own. For an instant she thought he was about to make a dash down the walk for them. Then he caught Flora's hand and pulled her back. There was no help for it, she thought.

Her other hand crept downward stealthily and gathered up her swinging pouch of gold. Trembling, she let him drag her back, but when they faced each other behind the plumes and swords of a great pampas clump she was shocked at the emotion in his face; and as if what he had just seen had given the last touch, his voice had risen a key, and between every half-dozen words it broke for breath.

"Look here, Flora," he began; "I know you've been trying to give me the slip ever since night before last. I frightened you then. I didn't mean to, but you had no business to keep the ring after what I told you. No, I'm not going to touch you," as she shrank back against the pampas swords, "but I want you to give it to me, yourself, right here and now."

She looked up into his face, burning fiery in the sun beating down on his bare head. "No, no, Harry; I shan't give it to you. Last time I said I would give it to you for a good reason, but now I wouldn't give it to you for anything."

"You don't know what you're doing," he cried.

"I do; I know as well as you that this is a part of the Crew Idol. I've known it all along, and when the time comes I'm going to give it myself to Mr. Purdie, but not until that time."

Harry passed his hand over his face with an inarticulate sound. Then, "You will ruin us!" he choked.

"I shall tell the truth, whatever comes," she exulted. To tell the truth and keep on telling it—that, in her passion of relief at speaking out at last, was all she wanted! But Harry fell back. He changed countenance. He recovered himself.

"Look here, Flora; if you do I'm going to leave you. I'm going to leave you to what you've chosen."

She met it steadily. "I'm glad you say so. I've been thinking for days that it would be better so."

"Have you?" he said in a low voice, looking at her earnestly. "Of course, I know the reason of that. I meant it to be different, but now there's no help. I—"

With a motion too quick for her to escape he

stooped and kissed her lightly. To that moment she had pitied him, but his touch she loathed. She thrust him away with both hands. He turned. Without speaking, without looking at her again he walked away. She watched him with a desperate feeling of being abandoned, of losing something powerful and valuable. The faint, thin screech of a locomotive from a station far down the line made him pause, and turn, and gaze under his hand in the strong sun. So for a moment she saw him, a lowering, peering figure moving away from her over the lawn between broad flower-beds. Then he disappeared among the shrubbery.

This encounter, that had stopped her in full open field, had not been the fatal thing she had feared. It had been a peril met that nerved her to a higher courage. Now she could walk gallantly to the most uncertain moment of her life. Between the glimmering willows down the long still avenue she passed, her flowing draperies borne backwards as by triumphant airs. The

wind of her approach seemed to reach the two still far in front of her.

They turned and watched her drawing nearer, and before she had quite reached them Kerr stretched out his hand as if to help her over a last rough place, and drew her toward him and held her beside him with his fingers lightly clasped around her wrist. She saw that he looked pale, worn, as he had not been last night, and, what struck her most strangely, angry. The hand that held hers shook with the violent pulse that was beating in it. He turned to Clara.

"Will you pardon us, Mrs. Britton?" Then after another patient moment, "Miss Gilsey has something to say to me." Still he made no motion to move away, and at last Clara seemed to understand what was expected of her. She flushed, and in the middle of that color her eyes flashed double steel. For the first time in Flora's memory she was at a loss. She passed them without a word.

Kerr looked after the little brilliant figure,

moving daintily away through sun and shadow, with deep disgust in his face. But when he turned to Flora disgust lifted to high severity. It was she who appeared the guilty one, and he the accuser.

"Why didn't you come, last night?"

"I couldn't. *He* was there, Harry, outside my door."

"In God's name! What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. We did not speak—but I couldn't get past him!" The suspicion in his face was more than she could bear. "You must believe me—for, if you don't, we're both lost!"

He had her by both wrists, now, and gently made her face him. "I have believed in you to the extent of coming alone to a place I know nothing of, because you wanted me. Now that I am here, what is it you have to say to me?"

"Oh, nothing more than I have said before," she pleaded; "only that, ten times more earnestly."

"You extraordinary child!" At first, he was pure amazement. "You've brought me so far,

you've come so far yourself—you've got us both here in such danger, to tell me only this? How could you be so mad—so cruel?"

She had locked her hands in front of her until the nails showed white with the pressure. "It was more dangerous there than here. You don't know what has happened since I saw you. And I thought if you and I could only be alone together, without the fear of *them* always between us, I could show you, I could persuade you—" Before his look she broke down. "Well—you see, they followed us—they're here."

"Grant it, they are." He seemed to laugh at them. "You have still your chance. Give everything to me and I can save you still."

" 'Save *me?*' Oh, nothing could happen to me so terrible as having you break my heart like this! If I should give the sapphire to you I should lose you—even the thought of you—for ever. Nothing could ever be right with us again! Won't you—" she pleaded, "won't you go?" and lifting her hands, taking his face between them, "Won't you, because I love you?"

He stood steady to this assault, and smiled down upon her. "Without you and without it I will not budge. Come now, this is the end. I never meant to do another thing."

She covered her face with her hands.

"Come, come." His voice was urging her, now very gentle. "It's more for your sake than for the jewel now." And his arm around her shoulders was gently forcing her to walk beside him not toward the drive, but away into the tree-grown sheltered wing of the garden. By interlacing paths, from the tremulous gray willows under the somber, clashing eucalyptus spears, under dark wings of cypress they were moving. She was bracing in every nerve against the unnerving of his presence.

It had been always so. Even across the distance of a room the mere sight of him had had for her the power to summon those wild spirits of the soul and body that turn reason to a vapor. And now so close, with his arm around her, that same power she had felt when she saw him first, the power that had made her come out and be

herself then, the power that had overwhelmed her in the little restaurant, was leagued against her again to make her do this one more thing, which she wouldn't do. Never, never! Despairing, she wondered that such an evil motive could have such strength.

"Where have you got it now?" she heard him asking, and she pointed downward toward where the pouch at her knee was swinging to and fro. "Take it up, then," and like a hypnotized creature she gathered it into her hand. But, once she had it, she held it clenched against him.

"You're going to give it to me," he prompted, "aren't you?—aren't you?" and looking steadily in her face his hand shut softly on her wrist, and held out her clenched hand in front of her. And still they walked, slowly. Like a pendulum the long gold chain swung from her clenched fingers. To the tree-top birds they seemed as quiet as two lovers speaking of their wedding-day. She felt her tension give way in this quiet—her hand relax.

"Dearest." The word brought up her eyes to

his with a start of tenderness. "Open it," he said, and her hand, involuntarily, sprung the pouch wide. They stared together into it. The little hollow golden shell was empty.

For a moment it held her incredulous. Then, faint and sick, all the foundations of her faith reeling, she slowly raised her eyes to him in accusation. She was not ready for the terrible sternness in his.

"Have you lied to me?" he asked in a low voice. "Have you given it to Cressy?"

"No, no, no!" she cried in horror. "It was there! I put it there myself this morning!" They looked at each other now equally sincere and aghast.

"But you have seen him; you've been near him?" he demanded.

She gasped out the whole truth. "This morning! He left me. He kissed me."

"Then, my God, where is he?" He gave a wide glance around him. Then raising his voice, "Stay where you are!" he commanded, and began to run from her through the trees.

She stood with her hand to her breast, with the empty pouch spinning in front of her, hearing him crashing in the shrubbery. Then, in sudden panic at finding herself alone, she fled back down the willow avenue, and burst out on the broad drive in full view of the house.

Kerr was not in sight, but there was a tremor of disturbance where all had been still. Clara's face appeared at one of the upper windows and looked down into the garden. Then Mrs. Herrick came down the stairs, and, showing an anxious profile as she passed the door, hurried away along the lower hall. There was a flutter in the servants' quarter, and from a side door the coachman appeared hatless, in his shirt sleeves, and ran toward the stable. All the people of the house seemed to be running to and fro, but she didn't see Harry. This struck her with unreasoning terror. She fled up the drive, and Clara's small face at the window watched her.

As she came into the hall she heard Kerr's voice. He was at the telephone speaking names she had never heard in sentences whose meaning

was too much for her stunned senses to take in; but none the less while she listened the feeling crept over her that there was some strange revolution taking place in him. It might be transformation; it might be only a swift increase of his original power. Whatever it was, he seemed to her superhuman. The house was full of him —full of his rapid movement, his ringing orders. If he knew that the sapphire was gone, what was the meaning of this bold command? Was he, knowing all lost, plunging gallantly into the clutches of his enemies? Or was this only a blind, a splendid piece of effrontery to cover his too long delayed retreat? She sat like a jointless thing on the fauteuil in the large hall, and all at once saw him in front of her.

She looked at his hat, his overcoat, his slim, glittering stick—all symbols of departure.

"Wait here," he said, and turned away.

She watched his shadow dance across the flagging, and as it slipped over the threshold she thought dully that now the sapphire was gone every one was going from her.

XXIV

THE COMIC MASK

SHE listened to the sound of wheels, first rattling loud on the gravel, slowly growing fainter. Then stillness was with her again, and inanition. She looked around and up, and had no start at seeing Clara's small face watching her over the gallery of the rotunda. It seemed to her that appearance was natural to her existence now, like her shadow. She looked away. When she raised her eyes again Clara was coming down the stairs, and even at that distance Flora saw she carried something in her hand—something flat and small and wrapped in a filmy bit of paper.

Out of the chaos of her feeling rose the solitary thought—the picture which she had bought that morning, the picture of Farrell Wand. She

watched it drawing near her with wonder. She sat up trembling. She had a great longing and a horror to tear away the filmy paper and see Kerr at last brutally revealed. She could not have told afterward whether Clara spoke to her. She was conscious of her pausing; conscious of the faint rustle of her skirt passing; conscious, finally, that the small swathed square was in her hand.

She tore the tissue paper through. She held a photograph, a mounted kodak print. She made out the background to be sky and water and the rail of a ship with silhouettes of heads and shoulders, a jungle of black; and in the middle distance caught in full motion the single figure of a man, back turned and head in profile. He was moving from her out of the picture, and with the first look she knew it was not Kerr.

Her first thought was that there had been a trick played on her! But no—across the bottom of the picture, in Judge Buller's full round hand, was written, "Farrell Wand boarding the *Loch Ettive*." She held it high to the light. Clara

had been faithful to her bargain. It was the picture that had deceived her. She studied it with passionate earnestness. She did not know the bearded profile; but in the burly shoulders, in the set and swing of the body in motion, more than all in the lowering, peering aspect of the whole figure, she began to see a familiar something. She held it away from her by both thin edges, and that aspect swelled and swelled in her startled eyes, until suddenly the figure in the picture seemed to be moving from her, not up a gang-plank, but through a glare of sun over grass between broad beds of flowers.

She was faint. She was going to fall. She caught at the chair to save herself, and still she was dropping down, down, into a gulf of spinning darkness. "Oh, Harry!" she whispered, and let her head roll back against the arm of the fauteuil.

With a dim sense of rising through immeasurable distances back to light she opened her eyes. She saw Mrs. Herrick's face, and as this

was connected in her mind with protection she smiled.

"Do you feel better?" Mrs. Herrick asked her. Then she opened her eyes wide and saw the walls and the high-arched ceiling of the hall directly above her, knew herself lying on the floor, saw above her the figure of Clara standing with a bottle of salts, and then remembered; and, with a moan, buried her face in Mrs. Herrick's lap. "Oh, no, no, no; don't bring me back; I don't want to come back!"

Their voices sounding high above her were speaking. Mrs. Herrick said: "What is that?" Then Clara murmured. Then there was the light rustling of paper. Flora moved her hand.

"Give it to me; I want it." She felt the stiff little square of cardboard between her fingers, and closed them around it fast.

After a little she went up-stairs holding tight to the baluster with one hand and to Mrs. Herrick with the other. After a little of sitting on the edge of her bed she lay down, still holding to Mrs. Herrick. She felt as though some cord

within her had been drawn tight, too tight to endure, and every moment she hoped it would snap and set her free.

"You don't think I'm mad, do you?" she asked. Her friend earnestly disclaimed it. "Then things are," Flora said, "everything. Oh, oh!" The memory overwhelmed her. "He took me there as if by chance! He gave the sapphire to me for my engagement ring. Oh, dreadful! Oh, poor Harry!"

All that afternoon and all night she slept fitfully, starting up at intervals, trembling at nameless horrors—the glittering goldsmith's shop, the Chinaman, the great eye of the sapphire, and, worst of all, Harry's face, always the same calm, ruddy, good-natured, innocent-looking face that had led her to the goldsmith's shop, that had smiled at her, falling under the spell of the sapphire, that had covered, all those days, God knew what ravages of stress and strain, until the man had finally broken. That face appeared and reappeared through the flashing terrors of her dreams like the presiding genius

of them all. Finally, drifting into complete repose, she slept far into the morning.

She wakened languid and weak. She lay looking about the room, and, like a person recovering after a heavy blow, wondering what had happened. Then her hand, as with her first waking thought it had done for the last week, went to the locket chain around her neck. Oh, yes, yes; she had forgotten. The sapphire was gone. Gone by fraud, gone at a kiss for ever with Harry—no, with Farrell Wand.

For Harry was not Harry; and Kerr was not Farrell Wand. He was indeed an unknown quantity. Since she had found Harry she had lost both Kerr's name and his place in her fairy-tale. She had seen his very demeanor change before her eyes. Indeed, her hour had come without her knowing it. The spell had been snapped which had made him wear the semblance of evil. His sinister form was dissolving; but what was to be his identity when finally he stood before her restored and perfect? If he were not the thief whom she had struggled so to shield, why,

then he was that very strength of law and right which, for his sake, she had betrayed.

She sat up quickened with humiliation. The thing was not a tragedy, it was a grotesque. Blushing more and more crimson, struggling with strange mingled crying and laughter, she slipped out of the bed, and, still in her night-gown, ran down the hall, and knocked on Mrs. Herrick's door, until the dismayed lady opened it.

"I thought it was he," Flora gasped. "I thought it was he who had taken the ring! Why didn't he tell me? Why did he keep it secret? I would have done anything to have saved it for him, and I let Harry get it! Oh, isn't it cruel? Isn't it pitiful? Isn't it ridiculous?"

Mrs. Herrick, who, for the last thirty-six hours, had so departed from her curriculum of safety, and courageously met many strange appearances, now was to hear stranger facts. For Flora had let go completely, and Mrs. Herrick, without hinting at hysterics, let her laugh, let her cry, let her tell piece by piece, as she could,

the story of the two men, from the night when Kerr had spoken so strangely at the club on the virtues of thieves to the moment when, in the willow walk, they discovered that the jewel was gone. Clara's part in the affair, and the price she had exacted, even in this unnerved moment, Flora's instinct withheld, to save Mrs. Herrick the last cruelest touch. But for the rest—she let Mrs. Herrick have it all—and under the shadow of the grim facts the two women clung together, as if to make sure of their own identities.

"I don't even know who he is," Flora said faintly.

Mrs. Herrick gave her a quick glance. She had not a moment's hesitation as to whom the "he" meant. "You will have to ask him when he comes."

"Do you think he will come back?"

Mrs. Herrick had the heart to smile.

"But think of what I have done. I have lost him the sapphire, and he loves it—loves it as much as he does me."

Again the glance. "Did he tell you that?"

Flora nodded. The other seemed intently to consider. "He will come back," she declared.

Upheld by her friend's assurance, Flora found the endurance necessary to spend the day, an empty, stagnant day, in moving about a house and garden where a few hours ago had passed such a storm of events. She reviewed them, lived them over again, but without taking account of them. Her mind, that had worked so sharply, was now in abeyance. She lived in emotion, but with a tantalizing sense of something unexplained which her understanding had not the power to reach out to and grasp. For a day more she existed under the same roof with Clara, for Clara stayed on.

At first it seemed to Flora extraordinary that she dared, but presently it began to appear how much more extraordinary it would have been if Clara had promptly fled. By waiting a discreet length of time, as if nothing had happened, she put herself indubitably on the right side of things. Indeed, when one thought, had she ever been legally off it?

That was the very horror. Clara had simply turned the situation over and seen its market value, and how enormously she had made it pay! Flora herself had paid; and she had seen the evidence that Harry had paid, paid for his poor little hour of escape which a mere murderer might have granted him in pity. Yet Clara could walk beside them, meet them at dinner with the same smooth face, chat upon the terrace with the unsuspecting Mrs. Herrick, and even face Flora in a security which had the appearance of serenity, since she knew that nothing ever would be told. At every turn in the day's business Flora kept meeting that placid presence; and it was not until the end of the day that she met it primed for departure. Flora was with Mrs. Herrick, and Clara, coming to seek them out, had an air of casual farewell. The small, sweet smile she presented behind her misty veil, the delicate white-gloved hand she offered were symbols of enduring friendship, as if she were leaving them only for a few hours; as if, when Flora returned to town, she would find Clara waiting

for them in the house. But Flora knew it was only Clara's wonderful way. This uprising and departure were her last.

Now all her waiting was for Kerr's returning. She did not know how she should face him, but she wanted him. A telegram came an hour before him, came to Mrs. Herrick announcing him; and then himself, driven up on the high seat of the cart, just as daylight was closing. She and Mrs. Herrick had walked halfway out toward the rose garden; and, seeing them there, he stopped the cart in the drive, leaped down and ran across the grass. Both hurried to meet him. The three encountered like friends, like intimates, with hand-clasps and hurried glances searching each other's faces.

"Did you save it?" Flora asked.

He looked at Mrs. Herrick, hesitating.

"You can tell, she knows," Flora assured him.

"No, I haven't saved it—not so far," he said. He had taken off his hat and the strong light showed on his face lines of fatigue and anxiety. "He gave me the slip—no trace of him. No one

saw him come into the city; nothing turned up in the goldsmith's shop. His friend, the blue-eyed Chinaman, has dropped out of sight. I haven't made it public," he glanced at Flora—"but our men think he's gone out by the water route—Lord knows in what or where! He must have had this planned for days." He didn't look at Flora now. He turned his communication carefully on Mrs. Herrick. "There were seven vessels sailed, that day, and all were searched; but there are ways of smuggling opium, and why not men?"

They were walking toward the house. Kerr looked up at the window where, a short time before, Clara's face had looked down upon the confusion in the garden.

"Is that paid woman still here?"

"Oh, no; she's gone." Flora looked at him warningly. But Mrs. Herrick had caught his tone. "Why shouldn't she be?" she demanded with delicate asperity.

Kerr had dropped his monocle. "Because, in

common decency, she couldn't. She sold Cressy to me for a good round sum."

Flora and Mrs. Herrick exchanged a look of horror.

"I'd suspected him," said Kerr. "I knew where I'd seen him, but I couldn't be sure of his identity till she showed me the picture."

"What picture?" cried Flora.

"The picture Buller mentioned at the club that night: Farrell Wand, boarding the *Loch Ettive.* Don't you remember?" He spoke gently, as if afraid that a hasty phrase in such connection might do her harm. Now, when he saw how white she looked, he steadied her with his arm. "We won't talk of this business any more," he said.

"But I must talk of it," Flora insisted tremblingly. "I don't even know what you are."

For the first time he showed apologetic. He looked from one to the other with a sort of helpless simplicity.

"Why, I'm Chatworth—I'm Crew; I'm the chap that owns the confounded thing!"

To see him stand there, announced in that name, gave the tragic farce its last touch. Flora had an instant of panic when flight seemed the solution. It took all her courage to keep her there, facing him, watching, as if from afar off, Mrs. Herrick's acknowledgment of the informal introduction.

"I came here, quietly," he was saying, "so as to get at it without making a row. Only Purdie, good man! knew—and he's been wondering all along why I've held so heavy a hand on him. We'll have to lunch with them again, eh?" He turned and looked at Flora. "And make all those explanations necessitated by this lady's wonderful sense of honor!"

It was here, somewhere in the neighborhood of this sentence of doubtful meaning, that Mrs. Herrick left them. In looking back, Flora could never recall the exact moment of the departure. But when she raised her eyes from the grass where they had been fixed for what seemed to her eternity she found only Kerr—no, Chatworth

—standing there, looking at her with a grave face.

"Eh?" he said, "and what about that honor of yours? What shall we say about it, now that the sapphire's gone and no longer in our way?"

She was breathing quick to keep from crying. "I told you that day at the restaurant."

"Yes, yes; you told me why you kept the sapphire from me, but"—he hung fire, then fetched it out with an effort—"why did you take it in the first place?"

She looked at him in clear astonishment. "I didn't know what it was."

"You didn't!"

It seemed to Flora the whole situation was turning exactly inside out. The light that was breaking upon her was more than she could bear. "Oh," she wailed, "you couldn't have thought I meant to take it!"

"Then if you didn't," he burst out, "why, when I told you what it was, didn't you give it to me?"

The cruel comic muse, who makes our serious suffering ridiculous, had drawn aside the last curtain. Flora felt the laughter rising in her throat, the tears in her eyes.

"You guessed who I was," he insisted, advancing, "at least what I represented."

She hid her face in her hands, and her voice dropped, tiny, into the stillness.

"I guessed you were Farrell Wand."

XXV

THE LAST ENCHANTMENT

THE tallest eucalyptus top was all of the garden that was touched with sun when Flora came out of the house in the morning. She stood a space looking at that little cone of brightness far above all the other trees, swaying on the delicate sky. It was not higher lifted nor brighter burnished than her spirit then. Shorn of her locket chain, her golden pouch, free of her fears, she poised looking over the garden. Then with a leap she went from the veranda to the grass and, regardless of dew, skimmed the lawn for the fountain and the rose garden.

There she saw him—the one man—already awaiting her. He stood back to back with a mossy nymph languishing on her pedestal, and

Flora hoped by running softly to steal up behind him, and make of the helpless marble lady a buffer between their greetings. But either she underestimated the nymph's bulk, or forgot how invariably direct was the man's attack; for turning and seeing her, without any circumvention, with one sweep of his long arm, he included the statue in his grasp of her. With a laugh of triumph he drew her out of her concealment.

To her the splendor of skies and trees and morning light melted into that wonderful moment. For the first time in weary days she had all to give, nothing to fear or withhold. She was at peace. She was ready to stop, to stand here in her life for always—here in the glowing garden with him, and their youth. But he was impatient. He did not want to loiter in the morning. He was hot to hurry on out of the present which was so mysterious, so untried to her, as if these ecstasies had no mystery to him but their complete fulfilment. He filled her with a trembling premonition of the undreamed-of

things that were waiting for her in the long aisle of life.

"Come, speak," he urged, as they paced around the fountain. "When am I to take you away?"

She hung back in fear of her very eagerness to go, to plunge head over ears into life in a strange country with a stranger. "Next month," she ventured.

"Next month! why not next week? why not to-morrow?" he declared with confidence. "Who is to say no? I am the head of my house and you have no one but me. To be sure, there is Mrs. Herrick—excellent woman. But she has her own daughters to look out for, and," he added slyly, "much as she thinks of you, I doubt if she thinks you a good example for them. As for that other, as for the paid woman—"

"Oh, hush, hush!" Flora cried, hurt with a certain hardness in his voice; "I don't want to see her. I shall never go near her! And Harry—"

"I wasn't going to speak of him," said Chatworth quickly.

"I know," she answered, "but do you mind my speaking of him?" They had sat down on the broad lip of the fountain basin. He was looking at her intently. "It is strange," she said, "but in spite of his doing this terrible thing I can't feel that he himself is terrible—like Clara."

"And yet," he answered in a grave voice, "I would rather you did."

She turned a troubled face. "Ah, have you forgotten what you said the first night I met you? You said it doesn't matter what a man is, even if he's a thief, as long as he's a good one."

At this he laughed a little grudgingly. "Oh, I don't go back on that, but I was looking through the great impartial eye of the universe. Whereas a man may be good of his kind, he's only good in his kind. Tip out a cat among canaries and see what happens. My dear girl, we were the veriest birds in his paws! And notice that it isn't moral law—it's instinct. We

recognize by scent before we see the shape. You never knew him. You never could. And you never trusted him."

"But," she interrupted eagerly, "I would have done anything for you when I thought you were a thief."

"Anything?" he caught her up with laughter. "Oh, yes, anything to haul me over the dead line on to your side. That was the very point you made. That was where you would have dropped me—if I had stuck by my kind, as you thought it, and not come over to yours."

She saw herself fairly caught. She heard her mental process stated to perfection.

"But if you hadn't felt all along I was your kind, if you hadn't had an idea that I was a stray from the original fold, you would never have wanted to go in for me," he explained it.

Flora had her doubts about the truth of this. For a time she had been certain of his belonging to the lawless other fold, and at times she would have gone with him in spite of it, but this last knowledge she withheld. She withheld

it because she could make out now, that, for all his seeming wildness, he had no lawless instincts in himself. Generations of great doing and great mixing among men had created him, a creature perfectly natural and therefore eccentric; but the same generations had handed down from father to son the law-abiding instinct of the rulers of the people. He could be careless of the law. He was strong in it. In his own mind he and the law were one. His perception of the relations of life was so complete that he had no further use for the written law; and Farrell Wand's was so limited that he had never found the use for it. Lawless both; but—the two extremes. They might seem to meet—but between those two extremes, between a Chatworth and a Farrell Wand—why, there was all the world's experience between!

She raised her eyes and smiled at him in thinking of it, but the smile faltered and she drew away. They were about to be disturbed. Beyond the rose branches far down the drive she saw a figure moving toward them at a slow, un-

certain pace, looking to and fro. "See, there's some one coming."

"Oh, the gardener!" he said as one would say "Oh, fiddlesticks!"

The gardener had been her first thought. But now she rose uneasily, since she saw it was not he, asking herself, "Who else, at such an hour?"

By this time Chatworth, still seated, had caught sight of it. "Hello," he said, "what sort of a thing is that?"

It was a short, shabby, nondescript little figure, shuffling rapidly along the winding walk between the rose bushes. Now they saw the top of his round black felt hat. Now only a twinkling pair of legs. Now, around the last clump of bushes he appeared full length, and, suddenly dropping his businesslike shuffle, approached them at a languid walk.

Flora grasped Chatworth's arm in nervous terror. "Tell him to go," she whispered; "make him go away."

The blue-eyed Chinaman was planted before

them stolidly, with the curious blind look of his guarded eyes blinking in his withered face. He wore for the first time the blouse of his people, and his hands were folded in his sleeves.

"Who's this?" said Chatworth, appealing to Flora.

At this the Chinaman spoke. "Mr. Crew," he croaked.

The Englishman, looking from the Oriental to Flora, still demanded explanations with expostulating gesture.

"It is the man who sold us the sapphire," she whispered; and "Oh, what does he want of you?"

"Eh?" said Chatworth, interrogating the goldsmith with his monocle. "What do you want?"

The little man finished his long, and, what had seemed his blind, stare; then dived into his sleeve. He drew forth a crumpled thing which seemed to be a pellet and this he proceeded to unfold. Flora crept cautiously forward, loath to come near, but curious, and saw him spread out and hold up a roughly torn triangle of news-

paper. She gave a cry at sight of it. Across the top in thick black type ran the figures $20,000.

Chatworth pointed a stern forefinger. "What is it?" he said, though by his tone he knew.

The Chinaman also pointed at it, but cautious and apologetic. "Twenty thousand dollar. You likee twenty thousand dollar?" He waited a moment. Then, with a glimmer as of returning sight, presented the alternative. "You likee god? —little joss?—come so?" And with his finger he traced in the air a curve of such delicate accuracy that the Englishman with an exclamation made a step toward him. But the Chinaman did not move. "Twenty thousand dollar," he stated. It sounded an impersonal statement, but nevertheless it was quite evident this time to whom it applied.

The Englishman measured off his words slowly as if to an incomplete understanding, which Flora was aware was all too miraculously quick. "This little god, this ring—do you know where it is? Can you take me to it?"

The goldsmith nodded emphatically at each

word, but when all was said he only reiterated, "Twenty thousand dollar."

Chatworth gave Flora an almost shamefaced glance, and she saw with a curious twinge of jealousy that he was intensely excited. "Might as well have a pot-shot at it," he said; and sitting down on the edge of the fountain and taking out his check-book, rested it on his knee and wrote. Then he rose; he held up the filled-in slip before the Chinaman's eyes.

"Here," he said, "twenty thousand dollars." He held the paper well out of the little man's reach. "Now," he challenged, "tell me where it is?"

Into the goldsmith's eyes came a lightning flash of intelligence, such as Flora remembered to have seen there when Farrell Wand, leaning on the dusty counter, had bidden him go and bring something pretty. He seemed to quiver a moment in indecision. Then he whipped his hand out of his sleeve and held it forth palm upward. This time it was Chatworth who cried out. The thing that lay on the goldsmith's palm Flora

had never seen, though once it had been described to her—"a bit of an old gold heathen god, curled around himself, with his head of two yellow sapphires and a big blue stone on top."

There it blazed at her, the jewel she had carried in her bosom, that she had hidden in her pouch of gold, and that had vanished from it at the touch of a magic hand, now cunningly restored to its right place in the forehead of the Crew Idol, crowning him with living light.

Speechless they looked together at the magic thing. They had thought it far at sea; and as if at a wave of a genii's wand it was here before them flashing in the quiet garden.

With an effort Chatworth seemed to keep himself from seizing on ring and man together. He looked searchingly at the goldsmith and seemed on the point of asking a question, but, instead, he slowly held out his hand. He held it out cup-fashion. It shook so that Flora saw the Chinaman steady it to drop in the ring. Then, folding his check miraculously small, enveloping it in the ragged piece of newspaper, the little man

turned and shuffled from them down the gravel walk.

Chatworth stood staring after him with his Idol in his palm. Then, turning slow eyes to Flora, "How did he come by this?" he asked, as sternly as if he demanded it of the mystery itself.

"He had it, from the very first." The pieces of the puzzle were flashing together in Flora's mind. "That first time Harry left the exhibit he took it there."

"But the blue sapphire?" Chatworth insisted.

"Harry," Flora whispered, "Harry gave it up to him."

"Gave it up to him!" Chatworth echoed in scorn.

But she had had an inspiration of understanding. "He had to—for money to get off with. He gave Clara all he had so that she would let him get away. Poor thing!" she added in a lower breath, but Chatworth did not hear her. He had taken the Idol in his thumb and finger, and, holding it up in the broadening light,

looked fixedly at it with the passionate incredulity with which one might hold and look at a friend thought dead. She watched him with her jealous pang increasing to a greater feeling—a feeling of being separated from him by this jewel which he loved, and which had grown to seem hateful to her, which had shown itself a breeder of all the greedy passions. She came softly up to him, and, lifting her hand, covered the Idol.

He turned toward her in wonder.

"Ah, you love it too much," she whispered.

"That's unworthy of you," he reproached her. "I have loved you more; and that in spite of what I believed of you, and what this means to me. To me, this ring is not a pretty thing seen yesterday. It is the symbol of my family. It is the power and pride of us, which our women have worn on their hands as they have worn our honor in their hearts. It is part of the life of my people; and now it has made itself part of our life, of yours and mine. Shall I ever forget how starkly you held it for the sake of my honor,

even against myself? Should I ever have known you without it?" He put the ring into her hand, and, smiling with his old dare, held it over the fountain. "Now, if you want to, drop it in." He released her hand and turned to leave her to her will.

For a moment she stood with power in her hands and her eyes on his averted head. Then with a little rush she crossed the space between them. "Here, take it! You love it! I want you to keep it! but I can't forget the dreadful things it has made people do. It makes me afraid."

In spite of his smiling he seemed to her very grave. "You dear, silly child! The whole storm and trouble of life comes from things being in the wrong place. This has been in the wrong place and made mischief."

"Like me," she murmured.

"Like you," he agreed. "Now we shall be as we should be. Give me your hand."

He drew off all the rings with which she had once tried to dim the sparkle of the sapphire, and, dropping them into his pocket like so much

dross, slipped on the Idol that covered her third finger in a splendid bar from knuckle to joint. Holding her by just the tip of that finger, leaning back a little, he looked into her eyes, and she, looking back, knew that it wedded them once for all.

THE END